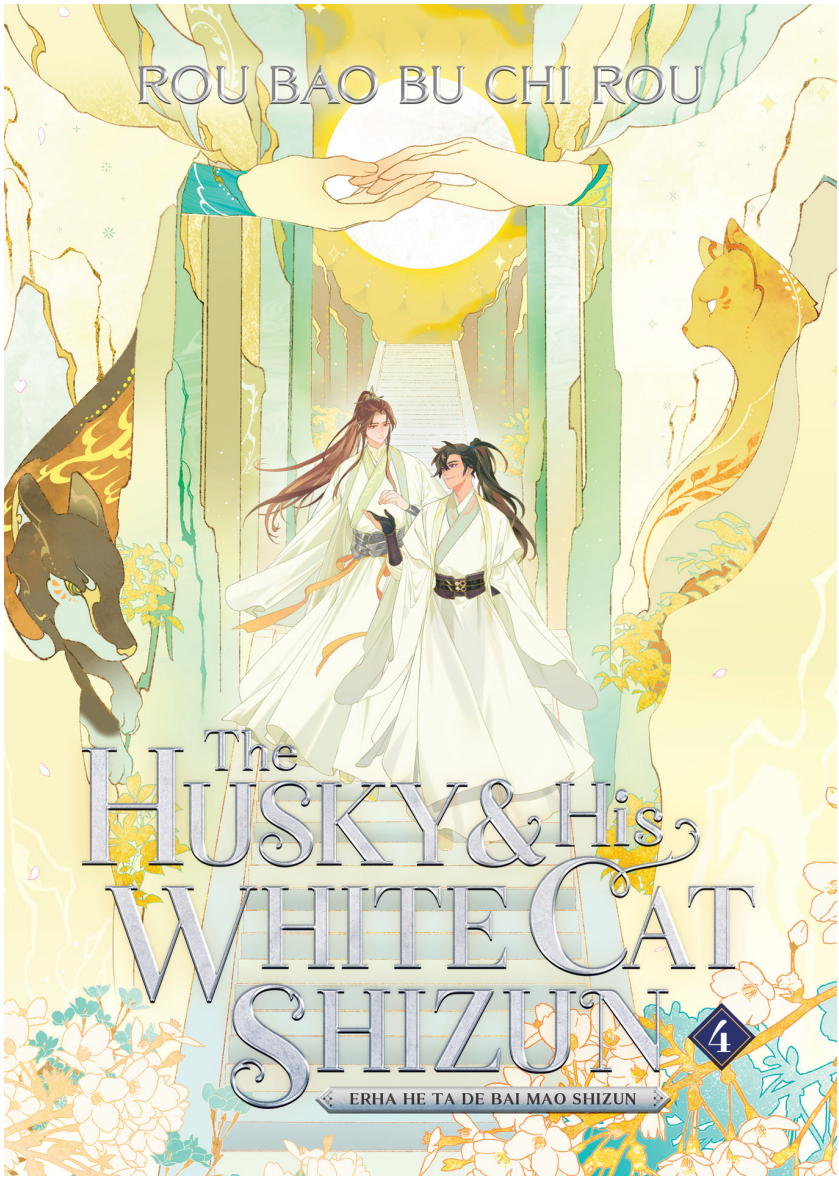
ROU BAO BU CHI ROU
The
HUSKY & His
WHITE CAT
SHIZUN
4
ERHA HE TA DE BAI MAO SHIZUN

Table of Contents

Color Gallery
Title Page
Copyrights and Credits
Table of Contents Page
Chapter 120: Shizun Goes into Seclusion
Chapter 121: Shizun Is the Real Zongshi
Chapter 122: Shizun's Reflection
Chapter 123: Shizun Visits My Dreams, for He Knows I Think of Him Often
Chapter 124: Shizun Awakens
Chapter 125: Shizun Doesn't Need to Find a Cultivation Partner
Chapter 126: Shizun, Wait One More Chapter for Me!
Chapter 127: Shizun, Careful, the Ground's Slippery
Chapter 128: Shizun, You Can't Just Wear Whatever Clothes You Feel Like
Chapter 129: Shizun, Do You Like What You See?
Chapter 130: Shizun, I've Crossed Five Years to Come See You
Chapter 131: Shizun Does Some Light Reading
Chapter 132: Shizun and Shi Mei
Chapter 133: Shizun Has the Purest Mind
Chapter 134: Shizun Sure Can Eat
Chapter 135: Shizun Studies on the Sly
Chapter 136: Shizun, Relax
Chapter 137: Shizun and I Get Settled In
Chapter 138: Shizun Just Might Blue-Ball Me to Death
Chapter 139: Shizun, Sweet Dreams
Chapter 140: Shizun, Turn Over
Chapter 141: Shizun, Don't Strip!
Chapter 142: Shizun, This Is Cruel and Unusual
Chapter 143: Shizun Is My Unattainable First Love, My Erstwhile Once-Lover, the Object of My Most Sincere Affection, the Source of My Most Torturous Affliction, and Has Been All Along
Chapter 144: Shizun, I Like You

Chapter 145: Shizun Has a Mealtime Companion Now
Chapter 146: Shizun, Is She Really Getting Married?
Chapter 147: Shizun, Let's Use Our Words, Not Our Fists
Chapter 148: Shizun Is a Natural Tease
Chapter 149: Shizun, I Can't Get Up
Chapter 150: Shizun and I Swapped Rooms
Chapter 151: Shizun, I Only Want You
Chapter 152: Shizun, Look! It's Mei Hanxue!
Chapter 153: Shizun's Most Hated Sect Leader
Chapter 154: Shizun, I'm Off to Look for Ye Wangxi
The Story Continues
Appendix: Characters
Appendix: Sects and Locations
Appendix: Name Guide
Appendix: Pronunciation Guide
Glossary: Genres
Glossary: Terminology
About the Author
Footnotes
Back Cover
Newsletter

The
HUSKY & His
WHITE CAT
SHIZUN
ERHA HE TA DE BAI MAO SHIZUN
4

The Husky & His White Cat Shizun

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Seven Seas Entertainment

THE HUSKY & HIS WHITE CAT SHIZUN:
ERHA HE TA DE BAI MAO SHIZUN VOL. 4

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

120 Shizun Goes into Seclusion

121 Shizun Is the Real Zongshi

122 Shizun's Reflection

123 Shizun Visits My Dreams, for He Knows I Think of Him Often

124 Shizun Awakens

125 Shizun Doesn't Need to Find a Cultivation Partner

126 Shizun, Wait One More Chapter for Me!

127 Shizun, Careful, the Ground's Slippery

128 Shizun, You Can't Just Wear Whatever Clothes You Feel Like

129 Shizun, Do You Like What You See?

130 Shizun, I've Crossed Five Years to Come See You

131 Shizun Does Some Light Reading

132 Shizun and Shi Mei

133 Shizun Has the Purest Mind

134 Shizun Sure Can Eat

135 Shizun Studies on the Sly

136 Shizun, Relax

137 Shizun and I Get Settled In

138 Shizun Just Might Blue-Ball Me to Death

139 Shizun, Sweet Dreams

140 Shizun, Turn Over

141 Shizun, Don't Strip!

142 Shizun, This Is Cruel and Unusual

143 Shizun Is My Unattainable First Love, My Erstwhile Once-Lover, the Object of My Most Sincere Affection, the Source of My Most Torturous Affliction, and Has Been All Along
144 Shizun, I Like You
145 Shizun Has a Mealtime Companion Now
146 Shizun, Is She Really Getting Married?
147 Shizun, Let's Use Our Words, Not Our Fists
148 Shizun Is a Natural Tease
149 Shizun, I Can't Get Up
150 Shizun and I Swapped Rooms
151 Shizun, I Only Want You
152 Shizun, Look! It's Mei Hanxue!
153 Shizun's Most Hated Sect Leader
154 Shizun, I'm Off to Look for Ye Wangxi
◆ APPENDIX: Characters, Names, and Locations
◆ APPENDIX: Glossary

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Chapter 120:
Shizun Goes into Seclusion

THE FIRST LIGHT OF DAWN painted the clouds red. Though it was still early, a large number of disciples had already gathered outside the Red Lotus Pavilion. They lined the sides of the pathway in their white mourning robes, their heads lowered and eyes downcast.

Dong, dong, dong.

The sound of the morning bell rang out from the Heaven-Piercing Tower. Several figures could be seen walking slowly in the distance, bearing a coffin. Xue Zhengyong and the Tanlang Elder walked in front, followed by Mo Ran and Xue Meng. Shi Mei and a monk dressed in worn robes walked on either side. They approached slowly through the morning fog, following the dew-slick bluestone path.

The monk held a lantern. Even in the light of dawn, the lantern's brilliant glow was visible; it emitted a dazzling golden radiance, like summer blossoms. The gathered disciples lowered their heads solemnly, scarcely daring to breathe. They'd all heard that Master Huaizui of Wubei Temple had hastened over for the sake of the Yuheng Elder—this unassuming monk must be him. The juniors' reverence toward such a legendary figure far outweighed their curiosity; none dared look too closely as he made his way up the long mountain path. Thus the great master passed by these reverent disciples, an airy billow of robes in his wake. His passage, for them, was marked by the tapping of his monk's stick and the occasional glimpse of hemp-woven shoes in their downcast gazes.

The coffin was steadily carried the whole way. Yet this was not a burial, but a revival. No one wept. As they reached the Red Lotus Pavilion, Huaizui looked around, then said, "Next to the lotus pond: that will do. There's an abundance of spiritual energy there, suitable for spells."

"All right, you heard the great master!" Xue Zhengyong, leading the others, set the black-ice coffin down beside the lotus

pond. “Great Master, if there’s anything you require, only say the word. Saving Yuheng is as good as saving my own life. If there’s anything I can do to help, I will!”

“Many thanks for Xue-zhangmen’s kindness,” Huaizui said. “This humble monk requires nothing at the moment. but will be sure to inform the sect leader should the need arise.”

“Of course. Please do not hesitate.”

Huaizui smiled. He pressed his palms together and bowed respectfully to Xue Zhengyong, then turned to address the others who stood nearby. “This humble monk is unskilled and will need five years to bring back Elder Chu’s soul. So that this humble monk may not be disturbed, the Red Lotus Pavilion will be closed to visitors from today until Elder Chu’s revival.”

Though Xue Meng had already heard that it would take five years for his shizun to return, at Huaizui’s reminder, the rims of his eyes grew red once more and he hung his head in silence.

“If anyone has any parting words they wish to say to Elder Chu, please do so now. There will be no opportunity otherwise for over a thousand days.”

And so they stepped forward, one by one.

Xue Zhengyong and the Sisheng Peak elders went first, each taking their turn to stand solemnly before the coffin and say their farewells. Xue Zhengyong said, “Let us meet again soon.”

Tanlang said, “Wake up soon.”

Xuanji said, “Hope everything goes well.”

And Lucun said with a sigh, “I kinda envy you, frozen in time for five years like this and not aging a day.”

The rest of the elders all said their piece, some with long spiels and some with short ones. In no time, it was Xue Meng’s turn. Xue Meng had every intention of holding it together—but the young man had always been ruled by his emotions, and this was no exception. He stood next to Chu Wanning’s coffin and began to cry.

Between sobs, while vigorously wiping away his tears, he managed to choke out: “Shizun, I’ll train hard, even without you around. I definitely won’t embarrass you at the Spiritual Mountain Competition. I’ll tell you all about how high I ranked when you

wake up. My shizun has no losers among his disciples, after all."

Xue Zhengyong walked over and clapped his son on the shoulder. Xue Meng didn't cling to his father as he usually did, instead turning away with a sniffle. In front of his shizun, he didn't want to look yet again like a useless, spoiled child who relied on his father for every little thing.

Next was Shi Mei. His eyes were wet as well, but he didn't say anything. He only looked at Chu Wanning for a time with his head bowed before quietly backing away.

After Shi Mei retreated, a pale pink haitang blossom was placed gently into the coffin. The slender hand that held it, though still youthful, was already approaching the length and span of an adult's.

Mo Ran stood at the coffin's side. A breeze danced over the surface of the water in the pond, carrying the softly sweet fragrance of blooming lotuses. The breeze tousled his bangs, but when he lifted his hand, it was to brush Chu Wanning's face.

Mo Ran pressed his lips together. He looked as if he had many things he wanted to say, but in the end, all that came out, soft and slightly hoarse, was: "I'll wait for you."

Wait for what? He didn't specify. He'd considered saying, *I'll wait for you to wake up*, but those words seemed somehow insufficient. There was no way to express the feelings close to bursting the vessel of his chest, as though there was a pool of scalding lava in his heart, trapped and roiling, slamming against the walls and bringing him pain and anxiety. It felt like it was only a matter of time before those walls were breached, and the lava would spill out uncontrollably, the raging flow melting him to ash.

But even now, he was still unsure what that burning feeling was. So he only said: "I'll wait for you."

With this, the Red Lotus Pavilion was shut and barred. An enormous barrier came down like a gate separating life from death, denying entry to all. For the next five years, no one would be allowed the fragrance of lotus blossoms in the summer, nor the quiet solitude of winter snow within the pavilion.

Bamboo leaves rustled in the wind and haitang blossoms drifted slowly to the ground. From outside the Red Lotus Pavilion

all the way to the main gate, disciples dropped to their knees and bowed. At the end of this vast river were Mo Ran, Xue Meng, and Shi Mei.

Xue Zhengyong announced in a booming voice that rang throughout the skies and forests, “Wishing Yuheng Elder well in his seclusion.”

The disciples, their heads bent to the ground, echoed solemnly, “Wishing Yuheng Elder well in his seclusion.”

Thousands of overlapping voices rose as one, rumbling from the mist-shrouded Sisheng Peak and startling birds into flight. Their calls filled the sky as they circled the treetops, afraid to land. The mass of voices rose heavenward, rolling like thunder through streaming clouds.

“Wishing Shizun well in his seclusion,” Mo Ran said in a soft voice. He bowed for a long time.

Five years of waiting.

After Yuheng went into seclusion, each of his three disciples, unwilling to take another elder as their teacher even temporarily, trained and cultivated on their own.

For various reasons—aptitude, cultivation path, other such factors—Shi Mei and Xue Meng stayed at the peak. Mo Ran chose to travel. It was true that he really did learn better through experience, but that wasn’t the only reason for his choice. So many things had turned out differently in this reborn life. Beyond Chu Wanning’s unexpected death, Mo Ran was also still greatly worried about the fake Gouchen.

He suspected that the person behind all this might have been reborn too. After all, whoever it was, they were arguably quite proficient with the Zhenlong Chess Formation. Yet no one else in his previous lifetime—all the way up until he’d taken his own life—had been capable of utilizing this forbidden technique to the extent he’d witnessed in the course of their repeated encounters.

Mo Ran had no talent for sleuthing. Ever since the battle at Butterfly Town, the entire cultivation world had been on high alert, waiting and watching for that mysterious actor to slip up and expose themselves. He didn’t really need to get involved. Mo Ran

knew he wasn't exactly smart; his strengths lay in his abundance of spiritual energy and his natural aptitude for cultivation. Since a future confrontation was likely inevitable, the most productive thing he could do right now was to recover his pre-rebirth battle prowess as soon as possible.

In his last life, he had been a destroyer. In this one, he wanted to be a protector.

Not long after Chu Wanning went into seclusion, Mo Ran stood before the main gate of Sisheng Peak, a travel bag slung over his back, ready to set off on his journey. Only a few people had come to see him off: Xue Zhengyong, Madam Wang, and Shi Mei. Xue Zhengyong clapped him on the shoulder and said, a little awkwardly, "Meng-er won't be coming, he said…"

Mo Ran chuckled, "He said he'd be too busy training in the forest to see me off, right?"

After a brief, mortified silence, Xue Zhengyong swore, "That thoughtless brat!"

Mo Ran smiled. "He's got his heart set on first place at the Spiritual Mountain Competition. It's only natural he's diligent about training. I'll leave it to him to add some glory to Shizun's name."

Xue Zhengyong looked at Mo Ran, then said, hesitant, "The Spiritual Mountain Competition is the foremost tournament in the world of traditional cultivation. I'm sure Ran-er will grow and learn much in his travels, but the competition will probably bar the kind of hodge-podge techniques you're going to pick up out there. It'd be a pity if you end up missing out because of that."

"My cousin's got it covered," Mo Ran replied.

"Don't you want to make a name for yourself?"

At that, Mo Ran actually burst out laughing. Make a name for himself? In his previous life, he had missed the Spiritual Mountain Competition because he had committed some wrongdoing and had been punished with confinement. He had always felt resentment over it. But now that same thing seemed so insignificant—what did it even matter? He was someone who had seen so much death and so many partings, awash in an endless flood of trials and tribulations; he was someone who had gone from defiant to

hopeful, from hopeful to resentful, from resentful to relieved, and from relieved to remorseful. The Mo Ran of the present no longer cared for beauties and fine wines or the worship of the masses, much less for things like revenge or the thrill of killing and destruction. He had already seen for himself the boundless opulence and luxuries at the apex of the world, and he had grown tired of it all. He didn't want to go back to such a cold place with no one by his side.

After all, he had once been Emperor Taxian-jun; he had stood upon the mightiest peak with the world in the palm of his hand, and he had seen all there was to see. Of course he wouldn't care about trifling things like some measly applause or a couple of cheers at the Spiritual Mountain Competition. And as for the ranking… Whoever wanted it was welcome to it.

"There are other things I'd rather do," Mo Ran said with a smile. "Xue Meng is a young master, and young masters have their own lifestyles. I'm just a loafer, and loafers lead their own loafing lives."

Madam Wang chided gently, "Silly child, what are you saying? You're no different from Meng-er, what's with 'young master' this and 'loafer' that?"

Mo Ran laughed cheekily but felt a small pang inside. One had been born into the lap of luxury while the other was of low and petty birth. Although he had been so immensely fortunate as to wind up here at Sisheng Peak, he had nevertheless spent the first ten or so years of his life in a murky haze. How could he and his cousin possibly be the same? But he couldn't really say any of that to Madam Wang, not when she was looking at him with that gentle, concerned expression, so he only nodded and said, "Auntie is right, I misspoke."

Madam Wang shook her head with a smile and handed him a small qiankun pouch embroidered with pollia flowers. "You'll have to look after yourself while you travel. Take this; it's filled with all kinds of medicine for treating injuries. I compounded them myself, so they're more effective than what you can buy in any store. Make sure to keep it safe."

"Thanks a lot, Auntie," Mo Ran said gratefully.

Shi Mei spoke next. "I don't have much of anything to give you

besides this jade pendant. Here, wear it. It warms your spiritual core."

In Mo Ran's hand, the white jade was creamy-smooth and warm to the touch: an exceedingly rare, high-grade item. He hurriedly pressed the jade pendant back into Shi Mei's hand. "I can't accept this; it's far too valuable. Besides, my spiritual core is fire elemental to start with; if it's warmed any further…I might have a qi deviation."

Shi Mei laughed. "Don't be silly. What do you mean, qi deviation?"

"In any case, I'm not taking it." Mo Ran stood firm. "You have a weak constitution; it'll do you more good than it would me."

"But I had someone purchase it at the Xuanyuan Pavilion auction just for you…"

Mo Ran felt warm at his words, but more than that, his heart ached for him. "Then it must've been really expensive… This jade pendant really won't do much for me, but it'd be great for you. Shi Mei, I appreciate the thought, but please keep it for yourself, and remember to wear it so it can nourish your spiritual energy."

Before Shi Mei could reply, Mo Ran uncoiled the thin cord and looped the jade pendant around Shi Mei's neck. "It looks good on you," he said with a grin, then lifted a hand to pat him on the shoulder. "Much better than it would on me. I'm such a rough-and-tumble kind of person, I'd probably break something like that in two days."

"Ran-er is right. The jade pendant can be worn by anyone, but it's best for people with water elemental spiritual cores. Mei-er, you should keep it."

Now that even Madam Wang had spoken, of course Shi Mei had to concede. He nodded and said to Mo Ran, "Take care of yourself, then."

"Don't worry, I'll write to you often."

Despite his sorrow at having to say goodbye so soon, Shi Mei couldn't help but smile at that. "You do realize only Shizun can read your handwriting, right?"

The mention of Chu Wanning left Mo Ran with a feeling he

couldn't describe. The hatred that had gnawed at his very bones had dissipated, but the remorse lingered, like a wound scabbing over: a dull, itchy ache in his heart. Holding that feeling in his chest, Mo Ran set off down the mountain alone.

"One, two, three…"

He counted in his head as he walked, head bowed.

"One hundred and one, one hundred and two, one hundred and three…"

At the foot of the mountain, he couldn't help but look back toward Sisheng Peak, shrouded amongst the high clouds, up the long flight of stone steps that seemed to rise without end.

He murmured, "Three thousand, seven hundred and ninety-nine."

He had counted as he walked. That was the number of steps up to the main gate, the number of steps that Chu Wanning had climbed that day, carrying him on his back. He was certain that for as long as he lived, he would never forget Chu Wanning's hands, cold as ice, chafed raw and bloody.

The truth of the matter was, whether a person did good or committed evil was rarely ever a feature of their inherent nature. Each person was like a plot of farmland: some were lucky, and their fields were sowed with grain which, come autumn, would bear an abundant harvest, paddies awash with the gentle fragrance of rice, fields of wheat rolling in the wind like waves. Looking out on the land, one would find it to be good and praiseworthy.

But others were not so lucky. Their fields were planted with poppy seeds, and the spring breeze brought only the miasma of intoxicated sin and euphoric decadence, filling the skies and blanketing the land with that vile, bloody red and gold. The people abhorred it, cursed it, and feared it even as they indulged in its blissful stupor, rotting away before its filthy stench.

In the end, the righteous and upstanding would gather to set fire to the field, and as the twisting smoke rose into the sky, they would say, *Oh, he was a breeding ground of sin, he was a demonic fiend, he was vicious and ruthless, he had no conscience, he deserved it*. All while he convulsed in the blaze, crying out in pain as the poppies shriveled into a charred, muddy morass.

But this person had once been a plot of good farmland too. He had once wanted nothing more than water and sunlight. Who was it who had planted that first seed of darkness, who sowed the disaster that grew out of control? That plot of land, once temperate and lush, went up in flames and sank into ash. Laid fallow.

Mo Ran was a plot of unwanted, abandoned land. He never thought someone would come into his life to plough these fields again, would give him a second chance.

Chu Wanning. It would be five years before he could see him again. Today was day one. He found himself already missing Chu Wanning's face—his stern, angry, gentle, serious, steadfast face.

Mo Ran slowly closed his eyes. He recalled his lives, past and present, so many bygone days scattering like snow in the wind. He realized that the Heavenly Rift incident had, in fact, been the greatest crossroads of his life.

In his last life, he had loved someone dearly. Later, that person had given up his life, and Mo Ran had fallen into hell.

In this life, there was someone who loved and protected him. Later, that person had given up his life, and brought Mo Ran back to the world of the living.

Chapter 121:
Shizun Is the Real Zongshi

ON THE EIGHTH DAY after Mo Ran's departure, Xue Zhengyong received the first of his letters. The brushstrokes on the paper were a messy scrawl that the author had clearly made a valiant yet futile attempt to neaten.

Uncle, I hope this letter finds you well. I'm at Blossom Crossing today, and everything is going fine. There was an evil spirit here a few days ago, but luckily no one was hurt. I've already taken care of the pesky water spirit, so the ferries may come and go safely again. The boatswain paid me five hundred in silver notes, which I've included with the letter. Please give Auntie and Shizun my regards.

On the hundred and twentieth day, the twenty-second letter:

Uncle, I hope this letter finds you well. I recently chanced across a high-quality spiritual stone that may be embedded into Xue Meng's Longcheng blade to make it a truly peerless weapon. It still won't be a holy weapon, but it should make for a fine improvement regardless. Please give Auntie and Shizun my regards.

The hundred and thirtieth day, the twenty-fourth letter:

Uncle, I hope this letter finds you well. Lately I've been cultivating at Snow Valley. It's always cold here, and there are all kinds of unusual flora, of which the frost lotus is the rarest. I didn't quite have the skills to get past the thousand-year-old ape monster guarding the flower field at first, but I've made good progress in recent days and managed to pick a dozen or so, which I've included with this letter. Please give Auntie and Shizun my regards.

Often, the letters came attached to small playthings, medicinal herbs, or spiritual stones.

Aside from writing to Xue Zhengyong, Mo Ran also wrote privately to Shi Mei. The letters detailed the places he went and the things he saw, asked Shi Mei how he was and reminded him to dress warmly, as well as other such trivial matters. The handwriting on these started off a mess, full of mistakes, and although the penmanship never improved to the point that it looked *good*, as time went on, it gradually straightened into something neat and mature, with fewer and fewer errors.

Thus did one year pass in the blink of an eye. One day, as Xue Zhengyong was savoring the fresh spring tea, another letter from Mo Ran arrived. He read it with a smile, then passed it to Madam Wang, whose lips also curled at the corners as she read.
"His penmanship has certainly gotten better."

"Doesn't it look just like a certain someone's?"

"Whose?"

Xue Zhengyong blew on his tea leaves, then retrieved a copy of *Variorum of Ancient Barriers* from his desk. "Compare it with Yuheng's. Pretty similar, eh?"

Madam Wang examined the scroll and said with surprise, “It really is.”

“He took Yuheng as teacher when he first came to Sisheng Peak, after all. Yuheng tried to get him to read, but he knew just a handful of characters, so Yuheng spent some time teaching him. He started with his name, then simple vocabulary, before moving on to more complex subjects.” Xue Zhengyong shook his head. “That boy didn’t take it seriously back then, always putting down some chicken scratches just to get it over with. But look at him now. He’s finally learned to write decently.”

Madam Wang said with a smile, “Going out to see the world is doing him wonders. He seems much more mature now.”

Xue Zhengyong was smiling as well. “Wonder what he’s gonna be like after the five years of traveling. How old will he be then? Twenty-two?”

“Twenty-two.”

Xue Zhengyong sighed with a hint of regret. “I thought Yuheng would watch them grow into their twenties. But the heavens had their own plans.”

Indeed, the heavens had their own plans: that’s what Mo Ran thought as well.

He traveled far and wide, from the misty rains of Jiangnan in the south to the Sanguan Pass north of the Great Wall. He sat on the banks of the Toulao River and chugged rice wine in the summer, then huddled by campfires and listened to the melody of a Qiang[1] flute in the winter.

In his previous life, Mo Ran had owned all the lands under heaven after declaring himself emperor, yet he had never once taken the time to walk them, to see with his own eyes the lanterns and fishing boats of the east or the underground aqueducts of the west; never bothered to note the dark, toughened, and cracked soles of a porter’s feet who carried load-laden poles over cobblestone roads; never stopped to listen to the singing of the young trainees in an opera troupe, their voices pitched like ripping silk, rising into the skies:

“Such brilliant splendor, blooms flourishing abound against a backdrop desolate, walls ruined and decrepit…”

He wasn’t Taxian-jun anymore; he wouldn’t ever be Taxian-jun again in this life. He was—

“Da-gege.” In the tender voice of a child from the street stalls. “Da-gege, can you save this birdy? Its wing is broken, I-I don’t know what to do.”

“Little Xianjun.” In the aged, raspy voice of Shijiu Village’s leader. “Thank you, thank you. All of us here are too old to contend with evil spirits; if not for you, we would’ve had to abandon our homes and go elsewhere. This old one…this old one will never forget Xianjun’s kindness as long as he lives.”

“Kind sir.” In the trembling voice of a beggar woman on the street. “Kind sir, my child and I haven’t had a real meal in days. Please, won’t you be so kind…”

Mo Ran closed his eyes.

He opened them again. There was someone calling him.

“Mo-zongshi.”

Stung by this form of address, he looked up at the suntanned fellow calling for him and said helplessly, “I’m no zongshi. That’s my shizun. Please don’t call me that.”

The man scratched his head bashfully. “Sorry about that. I know you don’t like it. It’s just force of habit ’cause everyone in the village calls you that.”

Presently, Mo Ran was staying in a small village near the border of the lower cultivation realm. Owing to the snowy mountain that towered a few miles away, the village was often troubled by snow ghosts. Such creatures were minor nuisances with little spiritual power; one of his shizun’s Holy Night Guardians would have easily taken care of them. But this village was far too remote for the use of Holy Night Guardians to have spread here. So, with few other options, Mo Ran had tried to construct one himself, following his shizun’s diagrams. He failed many times before finally managing one. It wasn’t as good-looking as his shizun’s, nor as nimble, but the creaking wooden automaton was at least serviceable.

The people of the backwater village, delighting in this curious new marvel, had started calling him *Mo-zongshi*. Mo Ran felt nothing but awkwardness at this development.

But the more awkward event was yet to come.

One particular evening, half the sky dyed red by the setting sun, Mo Ran was returning from lectures at an academy on Mount Taishan. As he strolled along a busy alleyway alongside an apricot grove, he heard someone calling.

"Chu-zongshi!"

Without thinking, Mo Ran's head whipped around. Then he almost laughed as his brain belatedly caught up. There were plenty of cultivators out there with the surname Chu; he really was getting ahead of himself, thinking his shizun had somehow awoken already.

Of course not.

Mo Ran shook his head with a smile and was just about to turn back around when the call came again: "Chu-zongshi!"

Arms around his pile of books, Mo Ran squinted into the crowd. Someone was waving at him, but the person was too far away for him to see his face. He could only vaguely make out his clothing and build—it was a young man dressed in blue cultivator garb with a bow on his back and a wolf at his side.

The caller walked over briskly. Once they were close enough to recognize each other, both were caught by surprise.

"You're…"

"Mo Ran." He reacted first with a nod of his head, his hands being occupied with the books. His curious gaze paused on the young man's face. "Fancy meeting you here, Nangong-gongzi."

As it turned out, the one calling him "Chu-zongshi" was none other than the scion of Rufeng Sect, Nangong Si. This guy had died too early in his past life for Mo Ran to have met him then, but not so Chu Wanning. His shizun had once been a guest instructor at Rufeng Sect, so it was only natural that Nangong Si knew him well.

As Mo Ran studied the young man before him, the quiver in Nangong Si's hand caught his eye. It was an old quiver made of cloth, so worn the camellias embroidered on its surface had faded, their once-vibrant petals yellowed with time as if even flowers of

cloth and thread couldn't escape the fate of wilting away. Nangong Si was neat and well-dressed from head to toe save for that threadbare, visibly patched quiver. Mo Ran could tell at once that this quiver was precious to him—after all, didn't everyone have a handful of sentimental objects? Even the flashiest person surely had some memories they held dear. No one was heartless, however they might appear. Nothing was so simple.

Nangong Si's brows drew together in thought. "Mo Ran… Ah, I remember now. Chu-zongshi's disciple?"

"Mhm."

With this realization, Nangong Si's attitude improved somewhat. "My bad. Your clothing and silhouette looked rather like the zongshi's from a distance, so I thought he had come out of seclusion early without me knowing."

Mo Ran tore his gaze away from the quiver, tactfully deciding not to pry as he replied without missing a beat, "When you called his name earlier, I also thought Shizun had come out of seclusion ahead of time without me knowing."

Nangong Si burst out laughing. Maybe because of his lofty birth, his handsome features still retained a measure of arrogance even in the grips of mirth. This arrogance of his was different from Xue Meng's—Xue Meng had a conceited pride born of skill and talent, while Nangong Si had a touch of belligerence: a headstrong, fiery kind of arrogance. But born as he was in the lap of luxury, this kind of attitude only made him seem wild and audacious rather than frightening. Mo Ran couldn't help musing that Nangong Si really was the spirited stallion his given name implied.[2]

He was still lost in thought when he heard Nangong Si say, "I was absolutely gutted to hear that Chu-zongshi lost his life in the Heavenly Rift. Thankfully he can be revived under the great master's guidance. I'll definitely pay a visit to Sisheng Peak once he wakes up."

"We'll be looking forward to it."

Nangong Si waved a nonchalant hand. Noting the books in Mo Ran's arms, he asked curiously, "What's Mo-xiong up to?"

"Studying."

Nangong Si had imagined Mo Ran must be studying some complicated, esoteric scrolls, only to find on closer inspection that he carried such simple classics as *Carefree Wandering*[3] and *Book of Rites*.[4] Nangong Si was momentarily dumbfounded. “These…these are all fundamental readings, books I learned by heart when I was a kid. What’re you doing reading *these*?”

“When I was a kid,” Mo Ran replied, his gaze clear and unashamed, “I didn’t even know how to write my own name.”

“Ahem…” Nangong Si coughed awkwardly. “You studying at an academy?”

“Yeah. I was collecting spiritual stones for cultivation on Mount Taishan a while back and happened to see that classes were starting at Apricot Grove Academy. I have some free time right now, so I’ve been attending the lectures.”

Nangong Si nodded. Seeing that it was getting late, he said, “Say, Mo-xiong hasn’t had dinner yet, right? Since you’re in Rufeng Sect’s territory, and Chu-zongshi’s disciple to boot, let me be a proper host. I’m actually on my way to a restaurant close by to meet up with a companion, so how about it? Join us for a drink.”

Mo Ran had no plans anyway. “How could I refuse such hospitality?”

“We’re headed to Wuyu Pavilion then, one of Linyi’s most famous restaurants.” Nangong Si chatted as they walked. “They make the best braised pork intestines. You ever heard of them?”

“Of course I have.” Mo Ran grinned. “They’re one of the top restaurants in the upper cultivation realm. You sure know how to pick a place, Nangong-gongzi.”

“I didn’t pick it.”

“Oh? Who did, then?”

“My companion did,” Nangong Si replied.

Having already lived through one lifetime, Mo Ran knew a thing or two about the complicated web of relationships within Rufeng Sect. With some surprise, he thought—though he didn’t say it aloud—was Ye Wangxi here as well?

He followed Nangong Si up the stairs, pushing aside the pearl curtain to step into a private booth. When he saw who was waiting

inside, he nearly choked.

It was Song Qiutong, dressed in light silks and standing before the window, gazing at the peach blossoms outside. She turned as she heard them enter. The golden ornaments that dangled at her temples swayed gently and caught the light so that her skin seemed all the fairer and her lips all the redder, beautiful beyond words.

Mid-step into the room, Mo Ran subconsciously pulled his foot back. He wondered if it was too late to tell Nangong Si that he didn't like Shandong cuisine, and most especially disliked braised pork intestine.

Chapter 122:
Shizun's Reflection

"HERE, MO-XIONG, let me introduce you. This is Song Qiutong, a little shimei from my sect."

In the end, Mo Ran forced himself to sit at the table and endure Nangong Si's enthusiastic introductions. Song Qiutong, Song Qiutong… As if Mo Ran needed Nangong Si to introduce this woman, when he knew well the number of moles on her back, the location of the birthmarks on her thighs.

But, with great restraint, he schooled his expression and nodded. "Miss Song."

"This is Chu-zongshi's disciple, Mo Weiyu of Sisheng Peak. You likely caught a glimpse of him back at Butterfly Town, but there were a lot of people there; you probably don't remember him."

Song Qiutong smiled sweetly and stood to make a respectful bow. "Qiutong is pleased to meet Mo-xianjun."

Mo Ran remained seated. He gave her a long, unreadable look before eventually offering a brisk "Likewise."

Truth be told, Mo Ran felt an incredible revulsion toward this wife of his from his past life. This revulsion hadn't only come about after his rebirth; it was something that had permeated deep into his bones even in the last lifetime. The few times he'd crossed paths with her in this one, they'd only met in passing, so he'd managed to tolerate it. Today, however, was another story.

Song Qiutong was a fragile woman, delicate and soft-spoken in every look and gesture. She was like an underripe fruit on the branch in early autumn, hidden behind luxuriant leaves. Her muted scent was less fragrant than that of the surrounding blossoms, her understated color not overly loud, but very likable—a slim yet full figure overflowing with endless gentleness and tender young love, ready to yield its sweetly tart juice at the smallest bite. Only after biting deep to the core would the dead, rotting worm within be discovered, pungent and festering, the fruit spotted with mold.

But then again, compared to what Mo Ran had done, it wasn't as if the Song Qiutong of the last lifetime had acted so abhorrently. All she had done was betray Rufeng Sect, the very sect that had saved her life. All she had done was offer up Ye Wangxi to save herself when Mo Ran razed the city. All she had done was doll herself up as Linyi turned into mountains of corpses and oceans of blood around her, overjoyed that she had won Mo Ran's favor and eager to serve her new master. All she had done was vilify Ye Wangxi after the massacre ended in order to prove her sincerity, pitifully weeping before Ye Wangxi's silent, dead body—saying how cruel he had been, how he had tormented her daily, how miserable her life would have been if Mo Ran hadn't come.

And?

Mo Ran pondered in silence. What else had she even done?

Nangong Si was an impatient person. A couple of dishes were taking some time to arrive, so he went to hurry the kitchen, leaving the husband and wife of a previous life alone in the room.

"Mo-gongzi, a toast, if you will." She filled his cup with a smile, revealing a glimpse of her white arm from beneath her flowing sleeves as well as the vibrant dot of cinnabar on her wrist.

Suddenly, Mo Ran grabbed her wrist. Song Qiutong made a sound of surprise and glanced at him, fright apparent in those delicate, dew-laden eyes. "Mo-gongzi, what are you…"

Mo Ran studied her face for a while, then dropped his gaze to those fair, slender hands. "You have nice hands," he said quietly, features cool and distant. "Does Miss Song know how to play chess?"

"A-a little bit."

"Hands this nice must be quite adept at chess," he continued coldly.

The sound of Nangong Si's footsteps came from the outside, and his wolf began barking by the door.

"Pardon me." Mo Ran let go of Song Qiutong's slender wrist. Then he carefully wiped his hand with a handkerchief.

Outside, the rays of the setting sun made a brilliant splash of color upon the dusky sky. Inside, a spread of food made a

sumptuous feast for a pleasant spring eve. Mo Ran wore his usual expression, as if nothing had occurred between them at all. Song Qiutong had been denigrated for no apparent reason, but she had always been good at abiding indignities, even getting up once during the meal to refill Mo Ran's cup. He had no wish to drink the wine she poured, and left the cup untouched for the remainder of the meal.

"Mo-xiong, the Spiritual Mountain Competition is coming up soon." Nangong Si said. "You're Chu-zongshi's disciple, so make sure you don't embarrass him. You ready?"

"I'm not going."

Nangong Si stared at him, flabbergasted. "You're kidding, right?"

"I'm serious," Mo Ran said with a laugh. "My cousin's got it covered. Every sect's gonna be there. I don't feel like crowding around with everybody."

Nangong Si still didn't seem to believe him, his piercing brown eyes narrowing like those of an eagle. Mo Ran's eyes were frank and unreserved as he returned his gaze.

The eagle stared at the rock until it was satisfied that it really was only a rock, and not hiding a cunning rabbit or a sly serpent. He leaned back in his chair, twirling his chopsticks between his fingers, and grinned. "Interesting. So I won't be seeing you at the Spiritual Mountain Competition then?"

"Nope."

Nangong Si put a hand to his forehead and snorted a laugh. "Chu-zongshi's disciple must really be something, to snub such a prestigious competition."

Bloody hell, Mo Ran thought to himself. How was he supposed to explain this? It wasn't like he could tell Nangong Si that, no no, that wasn't it—he was actually an old ghost in his thirties who had come back to life. Why yes, let Taxian-jun play with all these brats still wet behind the ears while a bunch of sect leaders that he had either killed or beaten up in his past life sat around in a circle on those lofty platforms, grading his performance on their little scorecards.

What a joke.

He cleared his throat. “It’s not that I think it’s beneath me or anything. More like I’m no good with orthodox cultivation techniques; I don’t wanna risk embarrassing Shizun with my shallow learnings if I go. Someone as skilled as Nangong-gongzi is much more suited to the competition. Please spare me your teasing.”

If a guileless little bird like Xue Meng had heard this, he probably would’ve been overjoyed, like Mo Ran had scratched him in just the right spot. But Nangong Si hailed from Rufeng Sect, with its complicated internal politics, and had lost his mother very young. His life had been far less straightforward, so he only smiled a little at Mo Ran’s praise and didn’t let it go to his head. He took several big gulps of wine, the jut of his throat bobbing, before wiping his mouth with his sleeve and asking, “Since Mo-gongzi won’t be participating, who do you think is going to win this round? Let’s have a bystander’s unclouded perspective.”

Mo Ran eyed him, thinking to himself that Nangong Si had sure asked the right fucking person. Who would know the competition results better than he? Other than that fake Gouchen, who was in all likelihood also reborn, Mo Ran was the only one in the world who knew how the Spiritual Mountain Competition was going to play out. The winner was…

“Nangong Si.”

The pearl curtain over the entrance of the private room was swept to the side. In the swaying light, a face appeared, half hidden in the shadows. Before either of the men in the room could react, Song Qiutong had already jerked to her feet as if stung, a wretched panic on her face as she lowered her head and said apologetically, “Y-Ye-gongzi.”

The newcomer stood tall and straight, dressed in black robes trimmed with muted gold. Bracers were fastened around his wrists, making for a lean, lithe figure. Three parts elegant and seven parts handsome—whom else could it be but Ye Wangxi?

“I wasn’t talking to you.” Ye Wangxi pushed aside the pearl curtain and stepped into the room without sparing her so much as a glance. His eyes, fixed on one person the whole time, were cold—though with a subtle flicker of some other emotion. “Nangong Si, I

was speaking to you. Look up if you can hear me."

Nangong Si did not look up. Instead, he addressed Song Qiutong: "What are you doing? Sit down."

"That's all right, Nangong-gongzi. My status is low; I should stand."

Nangong Si abruptly flew into a rage and his voice rose. *"Sit down!"*

Song Qiutong flinched, clutching the edge of the table in hesitation.

Wanting to move on, Ye Wangxi said in a cold voice, "Do as he says."

"Thank you, Ye-gongzi…"

Ye Wangxi turned from Song Qiutong as if he hadn't heard. "Nangong Si, how long do you plan to drag out this farce? The sect leader's so angry he's about to go mad. Get up and come back with me."

"That suits me just fine. I'll take him for a madman, and he can take me for dead! There's nothing to discuss even if I went back; I will not set half a foot into Rufeng Sect as long as the order stands." Nangong Si spoke, clearly and with a pointed pause between each syllable: "*Ye-gongzi*, kindly see yourself out."

"You—" Ye Wangxi's hands balled into fists as his entire body trembled minutely. Watching from the sidelines, Mo Ran half-expected him to kick the table over, grab Nangong Si, and bodily drag him off. But Ye Wangxi was a gentleman through and through; after a moment, he managed to smother the raging flames of his anger.

There was a long silence. "Nangong Si." When Ye Wangxi spoke again, it was in a hoarse, exhausted voice at odds with his upright appearance. "Do you really have to go this far?"

"And what if I do?"

Ye Wangxi closed his eyes and let out a near imperceptible sigh before slowly opening them again. Standing in front of the table, he finally turned to cast a glance in Mo Ran's direction.

Just as a family's dirty laundry should not be aired in public, a

sect's internal matters were likewise best kept from outsiders. Mo Ran tactfully rose and bowed to Ye Wangxi. "You know, I just remembered I have an appointment to pick up some clothes at the tailor, and I really shouldn't keep the shopkeeper waiting. I should head off."

Ye Wangxi nodded. "Many thanks, Mo-gongzi."

"Not at all, take your time chatting."

Mo Ran glanced at Ye Wangxi as he strode past. The young man was like a sturdy pine tree, holding himself with the same poise he always did. But this close, Mo Ran could see a faint redness at the corners of his eyes, as though he had been crying just before he came. He suddenly felt that Ye Wangxi's silent forbearance was not unlike Chu Wanning's.

Moved by impulse, he found himself turning to address Nangong Si. "Nangong-gongzi, I may not know what's happened between you and Ye-gongzi, but I do know he's always genuinely treated you well. So if you're willing, please have an open chat with him, and don't hold back what you want to say."

Nangong Si had little appreciation for this advice. In the heat of the moment, he discarded etiquette and coldly replied, "Mind your own business."

…This short-lived punk!

Mo Ran left. He hadn't even gotten down the stairs when he heard Nangong Si's furious bellowing from the room above as the wolfish young man tore into Ye Wangxi's soul with sharp fangs. "Ye Wangxi! What sorcery did you use on my father that he thinks more highly of you than he does of me?! Go back with you? What the fuck for?! All my life, when have *I* ever been given a choice in anything? Huh? Tell me, Ye Wangxi, what…what exactly do you all take me for!"

There came the crash of tables and chairs toppling over, and the smashing sounds of plates and cups falling to the floor. Every maidservant in the corridor was startled by the noise, and several other guests peeked out from their own rooms.

"What's going on?"

"Aiyo, what a temper! Hope they don't trash the place."

Mo Ran pressed his lips together, turning his head to look down the corridor again. He could hear Ye Wangxi's voice, brittle and lifeless as a withered leaf in autumn.

"Nangong, if it's my presence back home that's upsetting you, then I'll leave, and you'll never have to see me again."

A long, silent pause.

"So come back," Ye Wangxi continued. "I'm begging you."

If he hadn't heard it with his own ears, Mo Ran would have never believed that someone like Ye Wangxi, with his ramrod-straight spine, would ever utter words so weak as *I'm begging*. His impression of Ye Wangxi was as an immovable person of integrity, an invincible force on the battlefield; it was far easier for Mo Ran to picture him bleeding than crying, to envision him dying than kneeling.

But on this very day, in this very restaurant, in front of Song Qiutong, Ye Wangxi had said to someone, *I'm begging you*.

Mo Ran closed his eyes.

Over the span of a person's life, how many things would they never know, never find out? No one stood bare in front of others. Everyone hid their bodies under clothes and their feelings behind words and expressions. Everyone wrapped themselves in layers upon layers, their heads emerging like a flowering branch, offering the world only a painted face with an unambiguous look. Each played their own role—for life was but a play, the roles definite and clear-cut: sheng, dan, jing, and chou.[5] If someone had always played sheng, the male role, how could they simply accept a change of costume and a new layer of paint to play dan, the female role, instead?

But in the dead of night, when the cymbals ceased and the lute faded, when everyone had washed off their thick layers of makeup, the water would carry away the colorful, distinctly painted faces they'd worn, revealing the unfamiliar features beneath. It would turn out that the stage's young lady was actually a gallant young man, and the soldier had a pair of tender, infatuated eyes.

Mo Ran returned to the small room he had been staying in, deep in thought. He had lived two lifetimes, but how much did he really understand people? And what of himself? Chu Wanning alone

had been enough to make his heart blossom and then die, only to revive again.

Chu Wanning…

His thoughts drifted back to when Nangong Si had mistaken him for Chu Wanning earlier in the day. He had thought it funny—how did such a mix-up even happen? Yet as he washed for bed in front of the copper mirror, he found himself staring at the reflection of someone in a simple white cultivator's robe, with his hair high in a ponytail.

He had tied his hair up in a ponytail on a whim this morning. As for the robe, his clothes had begun to feel tight a few days ago, so he'd gone to the tailor to pick out a new set, and the white robe had caught his eye as he walked through the store. He'd bought it and put it on without much thought; he hadn't considered why the robe was pleasing to his eyes. Only now, while looking in the mirror, did he realize: this white robe was very similar to the one Chu Wanning had once worn.

The mirror was a dull yellow and his past life was like a dream. Looking at the person in the mirror, Mo Ran felt that he was looking at a fragment of Chu Wanning through this muddy color, a hallucination of him, muted as if in a vision.

The water he had not yet wiped from his face streamed down the gradually maturing lines of his jaw and dripped from his chin. Before the mirror, he vaguely recognized that, just as his Holy Night Guardian was a clumsy imitation of Chu Wanning's, he himself was also clumsily trying to imitate his shizun. Mo Ran had been unconsciously looking for Chu Wanning's shadow in the world; unable to find him, he had instead slowly become him.

Time marched on. And I, due to remorse, or perhaps something else—

I couldn't see you, but always I thought what you would do if you were here; what would make you smile, what would make you mad. I thought about you before doing anything, tried to make you proud with everything that I did. I thought, "If you were here, and I did this, would you nod? Would you be willing to praise me a little, say I did okay?"

Day after day I thought about this, until it had permeated my very

bones, become second nature. That's why, as time went on, I never even realized—

That as the days had passed, I'd grown into the you I held in my heart.

Chapter 123:
Shizun Visits My Dreams, for He Knows I Think of Him Often

"ZHAO-DAOZHANG, Li-daozhang, have you seen the rankings yet? The dark horse of the Spiritual Mountain Competition is really something this time!"

Within Pearl Teahouse, a group of traveling cultivators sat at a table, sharing a plate of peanuts, hot tea, and the hottest topic of the jianghu between them.

"Of course I have! Who expected the winner to be Sisheng Peak, that sect from the lower cultivation realm? All the old fogies in the upper cultivation realm have got their knickers in a twist! Especially Rufeng Sect—aiyo, their ancestors are turning in their graves! What was the winner's name again? Xue Fenghuang?"

"Ah? Ha ha ha, Xue Fenghuang? Old Zhao, please, you're killing me over here! Fenghuang? You're mixing it up with his nickname, 'son of the phoenix'! His surname is Xue, given name Meng, courtesy name Ziming, and his old man is Xue Zhengyong. Like father, like son—this Xue Ziming is impressively skilled!"

A tall man in a cloak sat by the fireplace, drinking butter tea and minding his own business. When he overheard their conversation, the cup by the man's lips stilled, hovering undrunk as he uttered a quiet, "Hm?"

"They seriously weren't kidding when they called him son of the phoenix. Every other little young master in there had a holy weapon, but this kid shows up with just a scimitar and has them cornered. Truly incredible."

"Did you forget who his master is? Of course a disciple of Yuheng of the Night Sky doesn't mess around!"

"Honestly, I think Xue Ziming's win was a narrow one. I'm sure you've heard that Xue Ziming and Nangong Si were evenly matched in the doubles. If not for that girl on young Nangong Si's team dragging him down, *heh*, could've gone either way if you ask

me."

At these words, the man who had been listening intently finally set down the cup of tea he was holding. He turned his head, eyes clear as autumn waters yet intense as lightning—this man had strikingly good looks to be sure. He flashed a smile at the chatting cultivators and joined their conversation. "Pardon my interruption, but I've been cultivating in the mountains these past few days and lost track of time, so I missed the Spiritual Mountain Competition. I couldn't help but overhear you saying that Xue Meng won first place…would you mind telling me more?"

Those cultivators were only too delighted to have an audience. They promptly and enthusiastically gestured for Mo Ran to come over, making room at the table for him. And Mo Ran knew his manners too—he was much more mature now than when he had first begun to travel. He asked the proprietress of the teahouse to bring over six teapots of Lingshan Rain, along with candied jujubes, tart kernels, sweet liquor cherries, and snake-gall melon seeds to share with the table. Smiling, he said, "Xue Ziming is the darling of the heavens, so for him to take first place without even a holy weapon isn't too surprising. But what's this I hear about Nangong Si of Rufeng Sect having a young lady on his team in the doubles…?"

Being a bunch of men, these cultivators were more than happy to gossip about ladies, even if the lady wasn't theirs.

"That he did. Truly a case of the hero's ambition sunk in the beauty's bosom. Otherwise, who knows if Xue Ziming would've been able to get the upper hand, given Nangong Si's skills."

"I see. Interesting." Things had played out quite differently in the last lifetime: back then, Ye Wangxi and Nangong Si had tied for first place. Mo Ran's first thought had been that the little phoenix Xue Meng, spurred by Chu Wanning's death, had diligently applied himself and soared to success. But it seemed there had been additional factors at work. "And who might this lady be?"

"The lass was named Song…something Tong; don't remember exactly. She sure was pretty though. She's got Rufeng Sect's little young master wrapped around her finger, by the looks of it."

"*Pretty*'s an understatement—astoundingly beautiful, more like. If I were Nangong Si, I'd give up first place at Spiritual Mountain to make a girl like that happy too."

Mo Ran kept his opinion to himself. It was just as he'd suspected.

The Spiritual Mountain Competition included three events: singles, doubles, and a battle royale. The scores were averaged across the three to determine the ultimate winner.

In Mo Ran's previous lifetime, Xue Meng and Shi Mei had faced off against Nangong Si and Ye Wangxi in the doubles event. Ye Wangxi had eventually gone on to become the second strongest cultivator in the world, outdone only by Chu Wanning—so the outcome of that match was self-evident. Heaven only knew what had gone wrong in this life for Nangong Si to drag that hindrance Song Qiutong behind him instead of teaming up with Ye Wangxi… Mo Ran set down his teacup and rubbed his temples. What the hell was that guy thinking?

"Ah, women; even that wild horse Nangong Si's been tamed in no time," one of the men lamented as the rest laughed and jeered.

Mo Ran couldn't help but ask, "What about Ye Wangxi?"

"Who?"

"Ye Wangxi," Mo Ran repeated.

The blank looks on their faces left a bad taste in Mo Ran's mouth. Ye Wangxi was a war god who'd given Mo Ran endless trouble in the last lifetime… How could these people possibly not know him!

"The other gongzi from Rufeng Sect." He gestured as he explained, "Long legs, tall, good temper, doesn't talk much, uses a sword and…" Watching all their faces devoid of recognition, Mo Ran sighed and finished his description, though he'd guessed the outcome. "And a bow."

"Don't know 'em."

"Never heard of him."

"Bro, where'd you hear about this guy from? Rufeng Sect sent sixteen disciples to the Spiritual Mountain Competition, and not a single one of them was named Ye."

Sure enough, in the present lifetime Ye Wangxi hadn't entered the competition. Mo Ran fell silent for a spell. He recalled that day at the restaurant, when Ye Wangxi had said to Nangong Si, *You*

come back, I'll leave. He suddenly felt rather uneasy, and rather pained.

It couldn't be, right?

Had Ye Wangxi actually left Rufeng Sect?

In his past life, right before the end, Ye Wangxi had told his executioner that he wished to be buried in Rufeng Sect's Tomb of Heroes, next to Nangong Si's grave. Mo Ran sighed at the recollection—how had things ended up like this? The slight changes, drop after drop, had spread into growing ripples. The world had turned on its head, and what should've been the ocean had become the land.

So it was that turns of fate could be as violent as a raging storm. That a change of heart, a renunciation of past hatred, could only be bought with hot blood spilt and bitter tears shed—so it had been with Chu Wanning and himself.

But the turn of fate could also come as a breathless silence, as it had with Ye Wangxi and Nangong Si. Maybe all it had taken was that one day at the inn on Rainbell Isle, when Nangong Si had allowed Ye Wangxi's group to stay the night. Maybe, late at night, Nangong Si had gotten thirsty and stepped downstairs for some tea, where he just so happened to run into the pitiful Song Qiutong. Maybe Song Qiutong had poured him a cup of water, or maybe she had tripped going up the stairs due to the injury on her leg; there was no way to know. It could have even been that Nangong Si had been too boorish when drinking water—perhaps he had spilled some on the wide lapels of his robes, and Song Qiutong had gingerly offered him a handkerchief. With nothing between them at the time, Nangong Si had probably uttered a quick thanks. But none of these three would have known, as the Northern Dipper swept across the night sky and the stars of Shen and Shang rose and sank, never to meet, that their lives had been irreversibly changed by that handkerchief, that cup of water, that simple thanks. None of them had heard the rumble of fate:

Nangong Si, yawning as he ascended the stairs.

Song Qiutong standing silently, watching him go.

And Ye Wangxi, in his room, lighting a candle to read the next page of an unfinished book.

In his past life, Mo Ran had fancied himself all-powerful and all-knowing, had thought he'd seen through all the mysteries of life. Only now did he come to realize that they were, all of them, mere duckweed adrift in this world, pushed about by rain and wind, little green wisps of soul too easily crushed by the stray toss of a pebble.

How lucky he had been to have drifted away yet somehow returned to Chu Wanning's side. To still be able to perform his filial duty for his shizun, to still be able to say to Chu Wanning, *I'm sorry, I let you down.*

He finished his tea and bid farewell to his companions. The wind had picked up outside, and the rain would soon follow. Mo Ran threw his cape over his shoulders and strode into the thick depths of the forest. His silhouette grew more and more distant, more and more faint, until it was no more than a small dot in the twilight, like a drop of ink spreading in a pool of water, thinning out until it disappeared.

Lightning flashed on the horizon and thunder cracked through darkened skies; the rain came in a torrential downpour.

"It's raining." Someone peeked out from the teahouse to look, only to duck back inside at the thunder's intensity.

"That's one hell of a storm… Damn, I laid millet out to dry earlier. It's gonna get soaked now."

"Welp. Hey boss lady, can we get another pot of tea over here? Might as well wait for it to clear up before we head home."

Mo Ran walked briskly through the rain, ran through the rain, fled through the rain, hid in the rain from the thirty-two absurd years of his past life. He didn't know if this violent deluge could wash away his sins. Chu Wanning might have forgiven him, but he had not forgiven himself. His heart felt heavy, so heavy he felt he might suffocate.

He wanted to use the rest of his life to do good, to make amends. But could such a downpour, even for the rest of his life, truly wash away the evil in his bones, the filth in his blood?

He wished dearly that this rain could fall for five years straight.

He wished dearly that, when Chu Wanning awakened, he could stand before his shizun a little cleaner, and then cleaner still. He didn't want to be as dirty as he was now when the time came: dirty like mud, like dust, like the grime on the bottom of a porter's shoes, the dirt under a beggar's nails.

He wished dearly that, before Chu Wanning awakened, he could be a little better, and then better still. Only then could the worst, worst disciple in the world possibly summon up the feeble courage to call out to the best, best shizun in the world.

That night, Mo Ran fell sick.

He'd always had a strong and hearty constitution, but all that meant was that, when he did fall sick, he would fall terribly, horribly sick. He lay in bed, sleeping bundled in the thick quilt. He dreamt of things from his past life—dreamt of how he had tormented Chu Wanning, dreamt of Chu Wanning struggling beneath him, of Chu Wanning dying in his arms.

When he awoke with a start to the howling wind and cold rain outside, he felt around for the flint to light the candle. But no matter how he tried, the flint wouldn't spark. In a fit of frustration, he threw it aside. He raked his hands over his face and pulled harshly at his own hair, and the jut of his throat heaved as he let out the grief-stricken howl of a pained beast.

He had escaped death, escaped blame, but he couldn't escape his own conscience. It scared him that he was sometimes unable to tell dreams from reality, continuously checking whether he was asleep or awake. It hurt feeling like his very soul had split into two, that of the past lifetime and that of the present, the two tearing into one another; the present cursing the past for being a ruthless lunatic with blood-soaked hands, the past snapping back just as fiercely, demanding to know why the present was pretending he had never done anything wrong in his life—how did he have the *nerve* to walk this earth?

The soul of the present bellowed at the soul of the past: Mo Weiyu, Taxian-jun, you scum of the earth, why did you commit such grievous sins?! How am I to make up for all you've done?! I want to start over, but you haunt me so—in my dreams, in my drunkenness, in the dimming light of fading candles, jumping out

when I least expect it to curse me with that twisted face! Cursing me with a thousand deaths, cursing me with retribution and reprisal.

You say this is all a dream that will one day shatter. You sneer that sooner or later I will wake to find myself back at Wushan Palace. You laugh viciously and remind me no one cares for me. That I killed the only person willing to die for me with my own hands. But was that me?! No, no, it wasn't me, it was you, Taxian-jun! It was you, Mo Weiyu!

I'm not you, I'm not you…

There's no blood on my hands, I—

I can start over.

The other half of his soul was shrieking as well, its sharp-fanged mouth open wide in a distorted face:

Weren't you feeling guilty? Didn't you fuck it all up? Then why don't you just die?! Why don't you repay all those people you hurt in your past life for no goddamned reason with your own blood?!

You beast! You pretender! How are you different from me? I am Mo Weiyu, but *so are you*! You carry all the memories and bear all the sins of the past; you'll never be free of me—I'm your nightmare, your inner demon; I'm that abominable soul of yours that will one day be judged by the heavens!

Start over? Why the hell should you get to? The nerve of you—what right do you have to start over? You're deceiving everyone, even the people who love you. Any good deed you do is merely to ease that tiny, pathetic burden of guilt in your heart, is it not?!

Ha! Mo Weiyu! Do you dare let them learn what kind of man you were in your past life? Do you dare let Chu Wanning find out that, in the last lifetime, it was *you* who cut his neck and bled him out, made his life a living nightmare? That it was *you* who blighted the world, transformed it into a hell on earth overrun with famines and disasters one after another?

It was *you*. Ha ha ha, you fucking beast, we are one and the same! There's no way out of this one; I *am* you, Mo Weiyu! You know it to be true!

Backed into a corner and on the verge of losing his mind, Mo Ran groped around the bedside for the flint and steel again, tried to light the candle to drive back the grisly darkness of night. But even the candle rejected him; even the candle didn't care to save him. He was alone in the dark, hands shaking uncontrollably as he tried over and over to strike flint with steel, over and over again, but there was no spark, there was no spark.

He finally collapsed onto the bed and burst into shuddering sobs. He recited apologies again and again. In the black of the night, there seemed to be a crowd gathered around his bed, each shadowy, wavering figure cursing him, demanding his life in vengeance, howling at him that he was once evil and would always be so.

Mo Ran didn't know what to do. Helpless, he muttered again and again, "I'm sorry… I'm sorry…" but no one paid him any mind. No one wanted to forgive him. His head was scalding hot, and his heart felt like it was on fire.

Suddenly, he seemed to hear a soft sigh.

When he opened his eyes, he saw Chu Wanning among the phantom shadows, looking just as he had—white robes falling loosely to the floor, wide, sweeping sleeves, features elegant and defined. He stepped forward and came to a stop before the bed.

"Shizun…" Mo Ran choked out between sobs, "I…don't deserve to see you again, do I…"

Chu Wanning said nothing, but merely picked up the flint and steel. He calmly lit the candle that had remained dark in the face of Mo Ran's best efforts.

Where his shizun was, there was a flame.

Where Chu Wanning was, there was light.

He stood by the candleholder with his long lashes downcast, then calmly looked up at Mo Ran and gave him a small, serene smile. "Go back to sleep, Mo Ran. See, the candle is lit now. Don't be afraid."

Mo Ran's heart felt like it had been brutally crushed by something heavy, and his head hurt so terribly he felt it might split. These words sounded so familiar, as if he'd heard them before. But

he couldn’t remember where.

Chu Wanning swept his sleeves aside and sat at Mo Ran's bedside. The rain outside was bitterly cold, but it was warm in the room, and the night was no longer dark.

"I'll stay with you," Chu Wanning said.

Mo Ran's heart ached at these words, clenching and twisting itself into a knot. "Shizun, don't leave." He clutched at Chu Wanning's hand under his broad sleeve.

"I won't."

"It'll be dark again if you leave."

Mo Ran was crying. Feeling embarrassed, he covered his eyes with his other hand. "Please don't leave me behind… I'm begging you… I really… I really don't want to be the emperor anymore, Shizun… Please don't throw me away…"

"Mo Ran…"

"Please." Perhaps it was the fever making him feel weak and dizzy, or perhaps it was because some part of him knew this was only a dream, and that Chu Wanning would vanish when he woke. He muttered over and over again, "Please don't throw me away."

That night, the icy raindrops outside pelted against the window like the knocking of countless vengeful ghosts trying to rush inside and claim his life in retribution. But inside Mo Ran's dream, Chu Wanning lit a candle, and that small halo of light drove away the ceaseless chill. He heard Chu Wanning say, "All right, I won't leave."

"You won't leave?"

"I won't leave."

Mo Ran opened his mouth. He wanted to say thanks, but the only sound that emerged was a whimper, the kind of pitiful whine a dog might make when gingerly trying to gain someone's favor.

"That's what you all say—that you won't leave, that you won't abandon me." Teetering on the edge of slumber, Mo Ran muttered dazedly with heavy-lidded eyes. "But then you all end up leaving anyway. No one wants me; I've been a stray dog half my life… Every time someone takes me in, they discard me within a few days… I'm so tired… Really…Shizun… I'm really so tired, I can't do

it anymore, I can't keep going…"

He was like a starving stray dog with no home to return to, with mangled paws and a grimy coat of fur, with no choice but to fight over food with beggars and feral cats to survive. There was no trust left in his heart after being abused for so long; if someone were to crouch nearby, a pet might expect to be fed, but a stray would only expect to be hit with rocks. Anxious and on edge, he kept walking, walking, snarling at anyone and everyone—this was his fate.

"Shizun, if someday you don't want me anymore, please just kill me; don't throw me away," he murmured between sobs. "It hurts too much to be discarded again and again. I'd rather die…"

His fever burned so high it turned him into a muddled mess; he couldn't tell where he was, and even forgot who the person in his dream had been.

"Mom…" The last thing he muttered before passing out was: "It's getting dark, I'm scared… I want to go home…"

Chapter 124:
Shizun Awakens

THE BARRIER AROUND Red Lotus Pavilion glowed and shimmered, day and night, throughout the seasons. Those within remained in, and those without were kept out.

Five years passed in the blink of an eye, the world turning like a carousel lantern, changing every day, changing every moon. In teahouses, in history books…those years became pieces of tales told, lines written in stories.

This was what had happened—

In the first year of Chu Wanning's seclusion, his disciple Mo Ran descended the mountain while Xue Meng and Shi Mei stayed at Sisheng Peak to pursue cultivation on their own. That year, Mo Ran's handwriting got a little neater, Xue Meng broke through to the ninth level of Nirvana Blade, and Shi Mei left to study with the medicine sect Guyueye at the end of the year, where he learned much.

During that time, Mo Ran paid a visit to the Chang family of salt merchants in Yizhou, asking to see Chang-gongzi about a personal matter, only to find that the man had passed unexpectedly a few days prior. Ever since he had learned while in the underworld that Chang-gongzi had been in cahoots with the fake Gouchen, Mo Ran had been hoping to pry some information out of him. But his quarry was one step ahead of him and had already silenced the witness—even the body had been burnt to ash. A dead end.

In the second year of Chu Wanning's seclusion, the cultivation world held the Spiritual Mountain Competition. Xue Meng won first place, Mei Hanxue second, and Nangong Si third. Shi Mei tended to the sick and injured across the lower cultivation realm, while Mo Ran roamed the land, defeating evil fiends and doing good deeds wheresoever he went, before retreating into the mountains to cultivate and disappearing without a trace.

The third year of Chu Wanning's seclusion fell on a ghost year, teeming with yin energy. The barrier where they had fought that

bloody battle at Butterfly Town became weak, and ghosts and fiends swarmed into the world of the living, terrorizing the people. The disciples of Sisheng Peak, led by Xue Meng, fought to suppress the menace. Although the situation was not so dire as it had been when evil ghosts had filled the skies, it was nevertheless a disastrous year of misery and destitution.

The upper cultivation realm, being large and populous, barred its doors in self-protection. Each of its nine major sects dispatched hundreds of disciples to guard the border between the upper and lower cultivation realms. They built an evil-repelling wall, preventing both fiends and refugees from moving east. Impoverished fugitives from the lower cultivation realms were rebuffed at the wall and abandoned to their fate; the border defense kept out ghosts and humans alike. And so there was peace and calm within the wall, while corpses littered the ground at its foot. Xue Zhengyong tried many times to negotiate with the upper cultivation realm to no avail. That year, all the blood spilt by the disciples of Sisheng Peak at Butterfly Town flowed eastward.

At the end of the year, Mo Ran, who had been cultivating in seclusion deep in the mountains, received a letter from his uncle. Learning that there was trouble in Sichuan, he stepped back into the world.

It was the fourth year of Chu Wanning's seclusion. Mo Ran and Xue Meng fought side by side, the two young masters of Sisheng Peak leading the charge in the lower cultivation realm, driving demonic fiends from the land. In the final battle, once again at Butterfly Town, Xue Ziming felled ghosts and demons by the hundreds and thousands, while Mo Weiyu repaired the Heavenly Rift, singlehandedly sealing away the evil.

In the following days, the upper cultivation realm reopened their borders and once again allowed the people of the lower cultivation realm to enter. Xue Meng and Mo Ran became famous the world over, the former for being the son of the phoenix whose prestige was unmatched, the latter becoming known as "Mo-zongshi" for repairing the Heavenly Rift with barrier techniques almost identical to Chu Wanning's.

So time flowed, all things ever-changing.

Though Xue Meng had made a name for himself at the

Spiritual Mountain Competition, he did not let it get to his head and did not grow complacent as he would have in his younger years. He went diligently to the bamboo forest to cultivate and train at every opportunity, whether in winter or summer, and even when sick.

He remembered his shizun's words: even without a holy weapon, the darling of the heavens was still the darling of the heavens. But his natural advantages were no longer sufficient to place him ahead of the curve; he now had to work harder than ever to offset a disadvantage instead.

Sometimes, after completing a set of blade techniques, when he landed lithely on the ground and turned his head, he seemed almost to catch a glimpse of a small figure sitting on the rock as the sunlight streamed through the bamboo, whistling through a leaf. He couldn't help but recall that day when Chu Wanning, turned tiny, had watched him practice his blade in the forest and guided his rhythm with a whistled tune. Glancing at that rock, Xue Meng could almost hear the melody. He closed his eyes, focusing his mind and letting his breath go still, before snapping them open just as a withered bamboo leaf came drifting down.

Longcheng sang, and the flash of the blade reflected in his eyes. The shadow of the blade extended and retracted with intent, its strike swift as the surging tides and the flash of lightning, its withdrawal unhurried as the flurrying of snow in the endless sky. When Longcheng fell still and he stood straight once more, that withered leaf had already been sliced into a million pieces, silently drifting to the ground by his feet.

With his head bowed, he could almost be mistaken for that foolhardy young boy. But when he looked up, those straight brows and clear, steady eyes were like the meeting of river and sea, a rapid stream surging into vast openness, melding into unbound tranquility.

It had been five years.

Xue Meng raised his blade and wiped its frosty edge clean with a square of white cloth. He was raising the blade to return it to its scabbard when he was interrupted by hurried footsteps coming from a distance. A disciple rushed in, hollering nonstop, "Young master! Young master!"

"What is it?" Xue Meng frowned. "Where's your composure?

Pull yourself together. What happened?"

"The Red Lotus Pavilion—" The disciple was red in the face and gasping from how fast he'd run. "M-Master Huaizui left! Y-Yuheng Elder—w-woke up!"

With a *clang*, Longcheng, the veteran of a hundred battles, tumbled from its owner's hand to the ground. Xue Meng's fair and handsome face drained of all color before immediately turning bright red, his mouth opening and closing mutely. He dashed off toward the southern summit of Sisheng Peak at breakneck speed, leaving even his own weapon behind, forgotten in the grass. He nearly tripped over a rock on the way, stumbling and staggering.

"Shizun! Shizun!"

Despite having just given a lecture on the need for composure, Xue Ziming certainly wasted no time flinging his own to the ground.

He arrived at the Red Lotus Pavilion to see Xue Zhengyong striding out. Before Xue Meng could set a foot inside, Xue Zhengyong, grinning broadly, held out a hand to stop his son from charging in like his life depended on it.

Xue Meng was beside himself. "Dad!"

"Yes, yes, I know you want to see Yuheng," Xue Zhengyong said with a smile. "But he's tired from his recovery, and only spoke a few words to me before falling back asleep. Surely you wouldn't disturb your shizun's rest?"

"I mean, yeah, but…" Xue Meng faltered. But waiting out these five years had been so awfully hard, and there was so much he wanted to tell his shizun; he wanted so badly to run in *right now* to tell Shizun how he had won first place at the Spiritual Mountain Competition, about all the ghosts and demons he had put down, about his…

"Be sensible now."

The phrase *be sensible* was Xue Meng's weakness, always able to stop him in his tracks and make him listen. He heaved a long sigh and stopped trying to shuffle past, though he craned his neck around his brawny father as if hoping to peek through the slightly ajar door and see the person on the bed. Xue Meng pressed his lips

together, not quite willing to give up. “Can I just—just go in and take a quick look at Shizun. I won’t make a sound.”

“You expect me to believe that, with the way you make a ruckus and a half whenever you’re happy?” Xue Zhengyong shot him a glare. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten how you won at the Spiritual Mountain Competition and acted so suave in front of outsiders but hollered about it for four or five days straight the minute you got home. You wouldn’t stop telling people how you kicked Nangong Si off his wolf; you told the story so many times even Auntie Li at Mengpo Hall can recite it word for word. You? Not make a sound? Hah!”

“Fine.” Xue Meng relented, drooping where he stood. “Father is right.”

“Well of course. When has your dad ever been wrong?”

Xue Meng made a sour face, but he still had to know. “Dad, how’s Shizun doing?”

“Pretty good. Master Huaizui even managed to purge the remaining poison from the Heart-Pluck Willow.”

“Ah, so Shizun won’t turn into little Xia-shidi anymore?”

“Ha ha, nope.”

Xue Meng scratched his head, a little disappointed to hear he’d seen the last of Xia Sini. “Then—then what about everything else? Is he feeling okay?”

“Don’t worry, he’s fine. The only thing *not* fine was the look on his face when he found out he’d been asleep for five years!” Xue Zhengyong chuckled as he recalled Chu Wanning’s expression. “Good thing he’s still tired, or else he’d be grilling me this very minute. Oh yeah, speaking of—” Suddenly recalling something, he said, “Meng-er, do me a favor. Your shizun missed quite a bit, out of the world as he was for so long. It’ll be too much for us to try to catch him up on everything ourselves, and it’d be tiring for him to listen to us tell it, too. How about this: go ask your mom for some money and make a trip down the mountain to buy some books in Wuchang Town. Don’t they have those chronicle-type books, the ones where they record everything big and small? Get him a couple to read.”

Xue Meng could practically smell his ulterior motives—his sly old fox of a dad obviously thought his son was being a bother and was trying to kick him off the mountain with the excuse of an errand. But then again, the errand was for his shizun, so it was…not unacceptable. Chu Wanning was asleep now anyway, and it was true that Xue Meng might not be able contain himself if he were to enter the room right now. There *was* a chance he'd end up running over and waking him.

So he sighed and mumbled reluctantly, "Fine, I'll go get the stinkin' books."

"Get a couple different ones, for both the upper and lower cultivation realms. Yuheng likes to read anyway."

"Okay, all right."

So it was that Xue Meng lumbered dejectedly down the mountain alone. He wasn't much of a reader himself; when he finally arrived at the bookseller's at Wuchang Town, he scanned the titles but couldn't figure out what was what. He squatted down to ask the vendor: "Uncle, do you have any books about recent events in the cultivation world? Can you pick me a couple?"

The vendor, who was quite excited to see a disciple from Sisheng Peak even if he didn't recognize the son of the phoenix, Xue Ziming himself, responded with great enthusiasm, "Books about recent events? Of course, of course! I've got both historical chronicles and fictional adaptations, all kinds of biographies and annals, regional chronicles, demon suppression records, even manuscripts from ten of the most famous storytellers in the land. What would Xianjun like?"

All this babbling was giving Xue Meng a headache, so he waved a hand and said, "Just—just gimme all of it; money's no issue."

The phrases most dear to a businessman are not *I love you*, *I care about you*, or *I want you*, but *I'll buy it*, *money's no issue*, and *one of each*. Thus the vendor immediately grinned from ear to ear, rubbing his hands together as he turned to gather piles of books from the rack to fulfill Xue Meng's order.

With nothing better to do, Xue Meng casually flipped through some of the books on the stand. Soon he happened across a thin

little booklet that seemed rather interesting. The page he'd flipped open read:

CULTIVATION WORLD WEALTH RANKING

FIRST PLACE: Jiang Xi

Rainbell Isle Guyueye Sect Leader

SECOND PLACE: Nangong Liu

Linyi Rufeng Sect Leader

THIRD PLACE: Ma Yun

West Lake Taobao Estate Master

And so on and so forth, down the entire page covered in tiny writing. Xue Meng at once got fired up, eager to discover his own rank. He scanned the page four times, then five, then again until his eyes started to cross, yet still couldn't find the name "Xue Meng." Somewhat crestfallen, then a little mad, but mostly undeterred, he flipped the page to continue looking. But on the next page, he only saw a few more names, followed by the line:

Due to time and resource constraints, rankings only go to one hundred, and those after will not be listed.

Xue Meng flung the booklet to the ground in a fit of rage. "Am I that fucking broke?!"

The vendor jumped, startled. Seeing the book Xue Meng had been reading, he scooped it up and hurried to mollify him, saying, "Don't be angry, Xianjun, these ranking booklets are just made up by folks willy-nilly, and on top of that, each region has its own version in circulation. If you buy one in Linyi, number one on the gentleman ranking is definitely gonna be Sect Leader Nangong. It's just something people thumb through to pass the time; don't be mad, don't be mad."

His words seemed reasonable enough. And Xue Meng *was* curious about the remainder of the booklet's contents, so he huffed, took it back from the vendor, and flipped through a few more pages at random.

This time, he saw an even more peculiar ranking:

YOUNG MASTER EGO RANKING

Chapter 125:
Shizun Doesn't Need to Find a Cultivation Partner

WRITTEN IN A NEAT and straight script, the ranking boldly declared:

FIRST PLACE: Nangong Si
Young Master of Rufeng Sect
SECOND PLACE: Xue Meng
Young Master of Sisheng Peak

Xue Meng stared at the booklet for a long, dumbfounded moment, then slammed it shut. Every muscle in his face twitched, as though he was barely restraining a powerful urge to set the book ablaze. "I see how it is," he bit out between clenched teeth. His expression was dark as he tapped the panic-stricken vendor with the booklet. "Wrap this book separately, I'll take a *close look* when I get back."

After shoving the wrapped copy of *God-Knows-What Rankings* roughly into his sleeve, Xue Meng took up the huge stack of books and scrolls the vendor had selected and wobbled his way back up the mountain.

He was mad. So mad he might die. Second place on the Young Master Ego Ranking? Bullshit! Which blind-ass dimwit wrote that! If he ever found out, he'd go give that person a good beatdown to vent this fury—a hundred punches, maybe more! *Ego, my ass! What dogshit!*

This bout of rage somewhat tempered his overwhelming elation, so that by the time Xue Meng got back to the Red Lotus Pavilion, his state of mind was no longer so volatile. Of course he was still incredibly excited, but the brief flare of anger had more or less cleared his head.

A pair of senior disciples stood guard outside the pavilion, keeping people out so the elder could rest undisturbed. But

Xue Meng was the young master; who would dare block his way?

Xue Meng walked in unimpeded.

Night had fallen, and honey-soft light glowed through the half-open windows of the pavilion's main hall. Unsure if Chu Wanning was awake or not, Xue Meng softened his steps as he pushed the door open and entered with his arms laden with books.

It was so quiet Xue Meng could hear his own heartbeat, bouncing like a bird at the tip of a branch. He held his breath and, temporarily pushing *God-Knows-What Rankings* to the back of his mind, looked toward the bed.

There was a long silence as Xue Meng stared blankly. "Eh?"

The bed was empty.

He was about to take a closer look when he felt an ice-cold hand on his shoulder, followed by an eerie, chilly voice from behind. "What are your intentions, trespassing in the Red Lotus Pavilion?"

Stiffly, mutely, Xue Meng turned his head, his neck creaking. A deadly pale face hovered in the dim light. He was so frightened that he screeched *"Wah—!"* and raised an arm to strike down the other on reflex before his brain even had a chance to process what he'd seen.

But the figure in the shadows was faster still, landing with lightning speed a strike on Xue Meng's neck and a solid kick to his guts. He forced Xue Meng to his knees and pinned him there as the books in his arms scattered over the floor.

Xue Meng's faint surprise turned into absolute shock at getting knocked to the floor like this. After five years of diligent training, he was no longer the boy he'd been; even Nangong Si was no match for him now. But this person, whose face he hadn't even seen clearly, had so easily dispatched him in two moves, leaving him no room to counter—who could it be? His ears rang as all the blood in his body rushed to his head.

Just then, that person spoke in icy tones: "I go into seclusion for five years and suddenly everyone feels at liberty to walk into my residence. Whose disciple are you and where is your master? Didn't he teach you any manners?"

He had barely finished when Xue Meng turned and threw himself at him in the tightest hug. “Shizun! *Shizun!*”

Chu Wanning froze.

Xue Meng lifted his head. Tears fell despite his best efforts to hold them back. He choked out between sobs, “Shizun, it’s me… look…it’s me…”

It turned out Chu Wanning had only just woken up and had gone to take a bath, which was why his touch was cold and a little clammy. He remained rooted in place. Though the light was dim, now that he had calmed down, it was enough to see by.

The person kneeling before him was a young man of around twenty. He had fair skin and dark, thick brows that were lower and closer to the eyes than most, giving him a pensive and compassionate look. His lips were full and pouty, with a pleasing shape.

A face like this would look spoiled even when angry. It was in truth all too easy for people with such features to be called “coquettish”—but not him. Eyes were the most expressive part of one’s face, and Xue Meng’s eyes were like a strong liquor: spicy, fiery, and unfettered in the light, giving off a domineering air. Those twin pools of liquor were unmistakable, even when contained in a pot of fine white jade.

It had been five years. Xue Meng had been only sixteen when Chu Wanning died; he was twenty-one now. Adolescent boys shoot up around sixteen or seventeen: a new look every year, a different build every six months. Having missed five years of this development, Chu Wanning hadn’t recognized Xue Meng at all upon unexpectedly encountering him.

Chu Wanning stared at him for a long time. “Xue Meng,” he said slowly. As if he was calling to him, but also as if he was telling himself—this was Xue Meng, no longer that half-grown youth in his memories. He was a grown man with wide shoulders and a height that was…

Chu Wanning pulled Xue Meng to standing with a face that betrayed nothing. “What are you kneeling for? Get up.”

…And a height that was not much different from his own.

The passage of time was the most obvious in the young, carving a child into maturity in a few deft strokes. The first person Chu Wanning had seen when he woke up had been Xue Zhengyong, so it hadn't quite hit him just how long five years was. But now, faced with Xue Meng, he was struck with the realization that it had indeed been a very long time, and that many people and things had changed.

When he finally managed to calm down a little, Xue Meng began to talk of this and that, clutching at Chu Wanning the whole time. "Shizun, at the Spiritual Mountain Competition, I…I got first place."

Chu Wanning glanced at him, and a small smile tugged at his lips. "Of course, that's hardly a surprise."

Xue Meng continued, red-faced, "I-I fought Nangong Si. He—he had a holy weapon, I didn't; I…" Feeling a little awkward about boasting so openly, he lowered his head and bashfully tugged at the hem of his robes. "I didn't embarrass Shizun."

Chu Wanning nodded, still smiling. "It must've been bitterly difficult."

"Not bitter!" Xue Meng paused, and then said, "It was sweet."

Chu Wanning reached out to pat Xue Meng on the head like he used to, but abruptly remembered that Xue Meng wasn't a child anymore and it might not be the most appropriate gesture. His hand veered off-course to pat him on the shoulder instead.

The two of them picked up the books strewn across the floor and stacked them on the table. "You've bought so many," Chu Wanning mused. "How am I supposed to read them all?"

"It's not that many. Shizun can read ten lines at a time; it'll only take a night."

Even after so long, Xue Meng's admiration hadn't waned in the slightest—yet it was Chu Wanning who found himself at a loss for words. Not knowing how to begin, he lit the candle and lightly flipped through a few of the books.

"Jiangdong Hall has a new sect leader now?"

"Yup, the new sect leader is a woman, and according to rumor she has quite the temper."

Chu Wanning kept reading. The page he was on was a long-winded chronicle of the comings and goings in Jiangdong Hall, which he read raptly, but as he came to the section entitled "Biography of Jiangdong Hall's New Sect Leader," he asked, as if it had only just occurred to him, "How has…Mo Ran been, these past couple of years?"

He had taken care to ask the question in a very mild and carefully controlled tone, so Xue Meng didn't think much of his interest. He replied, "He's all right."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Chu Wanning asked, looking up.

Xue Meng thought about how best to phrase it. "Means he's more or less a decent person now."

"Was he not a decent person before?" But before Xue Meng could even open his mouth to reply, he nodded to himself. "Indeed not. Continue."

Xue Meng hemmed and hawed. His specialty was laying out his own deeds in lengthy, dramatic narratives while describing the deeds of others in a simple and brisk manner—especially if that other person happened to be Mo Ran. "He's been running around everywhere these years. Grew up some," he said eventually. "That's about it."

"He didn't attend the Spiritual Mountain Competition?"

"Nope, he was cultivating in Snow Valley then."

Chu Wanning didn't pursue the matter. The two of them chatted about other sundry topics. Worried Chu Wanning might get tired, Xue Meng tucked away all the countless things he still wanted to say and excused himself.

After he left, Chu Wanning lay down on the bed, still dressed. He remembered everything that had happened in the underworld, so he wasn't at all surprised at how Mo Ran had changed. Time waited for no one. In the years he'd missed, even Xue Meng had grown so much as to be almost unrecognizable. He wondered—what did Mo Ran look like now?

He recalled what Xue Zhengyong had said to him before leaving earlier: "Yuheng, let's have a banquet tomorrow at Mengpo

Hall to celebrate your coming out of seclusion. No refusing now; I've already sent a letter to Ran-er. Surely you wouldn't want him to rush back all this way without a warm meal and good wine to welcome him?"

So Chu Wanning hadn't refused. He didn't like crowds, but Mo Ran had always been his weakness.

Xue Zhengyong had mentioned that many villages at the foot of Baitou Mountain had been destroyed during the latest Heavenly Rift at Butterfly Town, leaving most of the survivors either injured or crippled. Such was the severity of the damage that the villages were in ruins even now, and the entire stretch of snowy plains resembled a hell on earth. That was where Mo Ran was presently, helping the villages rebuild.

Chu Wanning continued reading by candlelight for a while, but couldn't resist the urge in the end. He rose and summoned a messenger haitang with a swish of his sleeve, then thought for a moment before speaking. "Sect Leader, if I may trouble you, please send Mo Ran another letter and tell him to not rush. It would be great if he made it back in time, but it's also all right if he doesn't. I won't blame him. The weather's getting cold, and winters in the Baitou Mountain region have always been harsh. Tell him to take care of the villages first, no sloppy rush jobs allowed."

Only after setting the haitang adrift did Chu Wanning finally sigh and lie back in bed, picking up the half-read copy of the cultivation world annals to continue where he'd left off. He wasn't such an outrageously quick reader as Xue Meng had said, able to read the whole pile of books in one night. But finishing a few of them was no problem.

Melted wax pooled in the candle holder as the night grew deep. Chu Wanning closed the book and shut his eyes, a slight crease between his brows. He had essentially read through most of the major events in the cultivation world within the last five years. The contents of the records had been rather unremarkable at first, but once he had reached the second Heavenly Rift at Butterfly Town, Mo Ran's name began cropping up in passage after passage. Chu Wanning had started off lying on his side, propping his cheek on one hand while flipping lazily through the pages with the other, but at this part, he instinctively sat up, holding the book with both

hands and reading closely.

The people of the lower cultivation realm fled eastward but were met with a guarded wall at the border and denied entry. This coincided with several days of overcast skies that allowed fiends to walk freely in the day. The common people died by the thousands before the wall, and blood flowed in rivers. September saw the food supply route cut off for seventeen days; murder and cannibalism were common…

Here was the chronicle of when ghosts and fiends had run rampant, and many commoners had thought to seek refuge in the upper cultivation realm, only to be turned away at the border. In the end, desperate and starving, they had resorted to killing and eating their fellows to survive. That scenes of such horror and carnage had been reduced to a handful of lines on paper left a sour taste in Chu Wanning's mouth as he read.

The defense was led by young masters Meng and Ran of Sisheng Peak. Xue Meng's reputation soared as thousands of fiends were exterminated and many more driven back by the blade Longcheng. Mo Ran singlehandedly repaired the Heavenly Rift, banishing the demons back to the underworld with barrier arts astoundingly similar to those of his master, Chu Wanning.

Chu Wanning opened his eyes a touch wider; though he knew the Heavenly Rift described here was not so severe as the one in which he'd lost his life, he was still surprised. "He can repair a rift all by himself now?"

As he kept reading, there were more mentions of Mo Ran's deeds, vanquishing evil as he roamed the land.

The Hedong region was set upon by a monster, which Bitan Manor refused to engage with for reasons undisclosed. Hearing of this, Mo Ran traveled there and found the Drought Demon of Yellow River. After a three-day battle, he decapitated the demon and burned its head to eliminate the threat. However, the young master was gravely injured, his abdomen and ribcage having been pierced through. He was fortunate to meet Jiang Xi, the sect leader of Guyueye…

Even the tips of Chu Wanning's fingers were ice-cold. *The young master was gravely injured, his abdomen and ribcage having been pierced through.*

Whose abdomen, whose ribcage? Mo Ran's? Chu Wanning read the passage over four or five more times, refusing to believe his eyes despite never having misread anything before in his life. On the sixth read, he even placed a finger on the page to follow along as he read the words one by one.

Hearing of this, Mo Ran traveled there…a three-day battle…

Chu Wanning could envision that black-robed silhouette, long boots striding through the towering waves of the Yellow River, one hand held behind his back and the other wrapped around a bright holy weapon in the form of a willow vine.

Decapitated the demon and burned its head to eliminate the threat. However, the young master was gravely injured.

His hand on the page clenched into a fist so tight the knuckles went white. He saw Mo Ran lashing out with the vine amidst the thunderous waves, Jiangui snapping across the sky in a fiery arc, severing the drought demon's head and sending blood flying; at the very same instant, the drought demon's sharp claws pierced clean through Mo Ran's torso.

The giant headless beast lurched for a moment before toppling to the ground with a deafening *crash*, its colossal body cutting off the flow of the Yellow River itself. Mo Ran collapsed by the riverside, unable to remain standing as blood soaked his robes…

Chu Wanning slowly closed his eyes and did not open them for a long, long time. His lightly quivering lashes grew damp.

In the end, all the books, without exception, referred to Mo Ran as "Mo-zongshi." These words left Chu Wanning with a feeling of indescribable strangeness and unfamiliarity. He couldn't reconcile the brightly smiling, indolent adolescent residing in his memories with a term of address like "Mo-zongshi." When it came to Mo Ran, he'd missed so much; Chu Wanning suddenly wondered whether he'd still recognize this disciple of his if he came back tomorrow.

A disciple who bore many more scars, a disciple who had become Mo-zongshi. Chu Wanning couldn't help his vague unease

at the thought. He both very much wanted to see Mo Ran and hadn't quite the courage to.

Troubled by these anxieties, Chu Wanning didn't doze off until the latter half of the night. Even after dying once, this man still didn't know how to take care of himself: he lay there in a mess of books with no blanket. He was as yet fatigued from not quite being fully recovered, and since scarcely a soul dared enter the Red Lotus Pavilion without permission, no one came to wake him.
Chu Wanning ended up sleeping the whole day away.

By the time he awoke, it was already the evening of the next day. He opened the window to a setting sun and fell into a prolonged silence. The lake reflected the dusk-red clouds, and a crane soared across the horizon, returning to its nest at the end of a long day.

It was already evening… Had he slept through the night and the entire next day?

Chu Wanning's face was ashen. A *crack* sounded where his hand rested on the window frame—he'd nearly snapped the wooden beam in half. How absolutely unacceptable. The banquet the sect leader was holding in his honor was about to start, yet here he was, still drowsy-eyed, clothes in disarray and hair undone… *What to do?* He fretted anxiously. *What to do, what to do, what to do?!*

"Yuheng!" Just his luck—Xue Zhengyong chose this exact moment to invite himself in. He froze at the sight of Chu Wanning sitting on the bed with an indecipherable expression on his face. "Are you still not up?"

"I'm up," Chu Wanning replied. And he would've pulled off a dignified look too, if not for that stray strand of hair sticking up at his temple. "Did Sect Leader need something, to personally come all this way?"

"Oh no, I'm good, was just getting worried 'cause I didn't see you come down from here all day." Xue Zhengyong rubbed his hands together. "Well, since you're up, get yourself washed and dressed, then come over to Mengpo Hall for dinner. Before leaving, Master Huaizui said you should hold off on food for twenty-four hours. Well, you haven't eaten anything since you woke up yesterday, and it's now been twenty-four hours. Perfect timing. I had them make a bunch of your favorite dishes: stewed crab

meatballs, sweet osmanthus lotus root, and all that. C'mon, let's walk over together."

"Thank you for going to the trouble." Upon hearing that stewed crab meatballs and sweet osmanthus lotus root awaited, Chu Wanning no longer cared to waste time getting ready and planned to instead to throw on a change of clothes and immediately set off down the mountain with Xue Zhengyong. Stewed crab meatballs had to be eaten hot; they got bland once they cooled.

"No trouble, no trouble." Xue Zhengyong rubbed his hands some more as he watched Chu Wanning put on his shoes, then suddenly remembered another piece of news. "Oh yeah, one more thing."

Chu Wanning had never been good with the mundane tasks of daily life, and his five-year slumber had only made him worse. He tried to put his left sock on his right foot for a good minute before wising up and swapping them, bearing all the while a perfectly straight face that betrayed absolutely nothing. Focused on righting the socks, he answered mildly without looking up, "What is it?"

"I got an urgent letter from Ran-er this morning," Xue Zhengyong said with a grin. "He says he'll definitely make it back tonight. And he got you a congratulatory gift too; he's really getting quite thoughtful as he gets older, I… Hey, Yuheng, why are you taking off your socks?"

"No reason, they're yesterday's," Chu Wanning said. "They're a little dirty. I'm changing to a fresh pair."

"…Then why didn't you do that earlier?"

"I just remembered."

Xue Zhengyong was an open and forthright fellow; he didn't think much about this. He looked around the room for a bit before commenting, "You know, Yuheng, you're not getting any younger. If you ask me, it's about time you got a cultivation partner. Just look at this place—it was neat and tidy when Master Huaizui left, but now you've woken up, there're already papers and clothes all over even though you've barely lived in the place yet… I'll keep an eye out for you, how about it?"

"Sect Leader, kindly see yourself out."

"Eh?"

Chu Wanning's face was like a storm cloud. "I'm changing."

"Ha ha, sure, I'll get out. But the cultivation partner thing…?"

Chu Wanning's head snapped up, his eyes cold as a pair of frozen lakes as he nailed the tactless Xue Zhengyong with a glare. Finally catching on, Xue Zhengyong chuckled awkwardly. "Just asking. I was wondering what you look for in a partner. I'm sure you wouldn't settle for just anyone."

Chu Wanning shot Xue Zhengyong another glare from beneath his lashes.

Xue Zhengyong sighed. "What, am I wrong?" he said helplessly. "I know you're picky."

"I just have better things to do, is all," Chu Wanning replied mildly. "How is that being picky?"

"All right then, if you're not picky, then tell me—what's your type. No pressure or anything, just so I can keep an eye out."

Already annoyed and refusing to waste any more breath on this topic, Chu Wanning said dismissively, "Alive. Female. Sect Leader can feel free to keep an eye out. Kindly see yourself out."

He shooed Xue Zhengyong toward the door as he spoke, but Xue Zhengyong wasn't about to give up just yet, especially after the whole dying thing—he was really, truly, wholeheartedly invested in getting Chu Wanning hitched.

Back when Chu Wanning had died, Xue Zhengyong greatly regretted that this man hadn't left a child behind like Xue Zhengyong's brother had, which meant he had nothing to remember him by, and no one to look after and make amends to. Chu Wanning had neither children nor siblings and had always kept to himself. Xue Zhengyong had been disconsolate and had felt incredibly guilty. More than that, he'd felt that Chu Wanning really was too pitifully lonely.

"That tells me absolutely nothing… Yuheng, really, I'm being serious here—hey!"

Xue Zhengyong, struggle as he might, was finally shoved out and the door slammed in his face. Followed by a barrier to make sure he *stayed* out.

He stared at the barrier, stupefied.

Chapter 126:
Shizun, Wait One More Chapter for Me!

THE END OF the Yuheng Elder's seclusion was naturally a cause for celebration for the entire sect. Xue Zhengyong knew Chu Wanning disliked the bustle of gatherings and wasn't much for speeches, so he'd planned out for him ahead of time what to say and what to do.

Chu Wanning had been concerned that he might be awkward at the banquet, but he soon found out that he had no reason to worry. Xue Zhengyong might've been a big, burly man, but he was keenly perceptive and had a good grasp of the mood. Before the gathered mass of all the elders and disciples, he spoke some words from the bottom of his heart—not so much as to be maudlin, but enough to be genuinely moving.

Only the Lucun Elder couldn't read the room, laughing as he shouted: "Yuheng, why the long face on this happy occasion? You should say a few words too! Some of the new disciples here don't even know what you look like."

Xue Zhengyong tried valiantly to save him. "Lucun, I've already said all there is to say for Yuheng. Don't put him on the spot."

"That's different; he's gotta put in at least a couple of words."

"But he—"

"It's fine." A deep, cool voice cut in. "Since there are new disciples here, I'll say a few words." Chu Wanning stood as he spoke. His eyes scanned Mengpo Hall, taking in the lively crowd of thousands all looking at him.

But Mo Ran wasn't among them.

Chu Wanning thought for a moment, then said, "The Red Lotus Pavilion on the southern summit is equipped with myriad defensive mechanisms and mechanical guardians. In the interest of preventing accidental injuries, new disciples are advised against visiting without cause."

The crowd fell silent.

After an incredulous pause, Lucun couldn't help but ask, "That's it?"

"That's it," replied Chu Wanning. He lowered his eyes and swept his sleeves aside to sit back down.

The silence stretched. The new disciples were dubious: dying and then coming back to life after five years of seclusion was definitely not something most people would ever experience. Shouldn't one at least say something heartfelt, or express some gratitude to one's savior, things like that? Yet this elder just tossed out a line like he was reading out the tenets and left it at this. Where was the sincerity?

But the older disciples couldn't help laughing quietly, several of them whispering to each other, "That's the Yuheng Elder, all right."

"Still doesn't like talking."

"*Pfft*, seriously. Bad temper and short fuse. He's got a handsome face, but that's about it," someone quipped under the ebb and flow of chatter in the hall. They were far enough away that Chu Wanning wouldn't hear. The group chuckled amongst themselves, then turned to look toward that white-robed man sitting beside Xue Zhengyong.

The banquet began. There were spicy and savory Sichuan dishes, of course, but also plenty of finely made desserts and beautifully arranged, mild and sweet Jiangnan dishes, their abundance filling entire tables. Xue Zhengyong had also opened a hundred or more jars of top-quality pear blossom white wine to share between the tables, and cups were generously filled with the amber-colored liquor. Chu Wanning was on his fourth stewed crab meatball when a large bowl was set before him with a *clunk*. "Yuheng! Let's have a cup!"

Chu Wanning eyed the bowl, then Xue Zhengyong. "That's a bowl."

"Aiya, who cares if it's a cup or a bowl, just drink it! It's your favorite, pear blossom white!" Xue Zhengyong's bold features were practically glowing with joy in the convivial atmosphere. "I know how much you can drink! A thousand cups won't even get you

tipsy! C'mon, cheers!"

Chu Wanning smiled and picked up the bowl, clinking it against Xue Zhengyong's. "If the Sect Leader says so, then cheers."

With that, he drained the entire bowl before flipping it over to show Xue Zhengyong.

Xue Zhengyong was overjoyed, but the rims of his eyes had turned a little red. "That's my man! I remember, five years ago, you asked me for a jar of top-quality pear blossom white from the cellar and I wouldn't give it to you. After what happened, I couldn't regret it enough; I thought I'd never…never get to…" He trailed off, then lifted his head and huffed out a long exhale before declaring loudly, "Never mind! No point dwelling on it! If you want it, you can have the whole cellar! I'll make sure you have good wine to drink for the rest of your life!"

Chu Wanning smiled. "Deal."

While they were chatting, Xue Meng was over in a corner with someone, whispering back and forth for some time. Xue Meng suddenly grabbed hold of that person and hauled him over. Both of them bowed to Chu Wanning in proper, upright form.

"Shizun!" Xue Meng lifted his head, his youthful countenance handsome and commanding.

"Shizun." The other person also lifted his head, revealing a face as beautiful as a lotus coming into bloom or as wisps of cloud drifting lightly between peaks—who else could it be but Shi Mei?

"This disciple was held up seeing patients at the free clinic in Wuchang Town today," Shi Mei said bashfully, "and only now came to visit Shizun. Pray forgive this disciple's shameful tardiness."

"It's no matter." Chu Wanning looked Shi Mei over carefully through lowered lashes. Though his expression remained neutral, he was caught off guard by a sudden and deep sense of loss.

Mo Ran's beloved person had grown into someone incomparably lovely. If the Shi Mei of five years ago had been a fledgling beauty, then the grown-up Shi Mei before him was like a queen of the night in full bloom, its tender green sepals unable to hide the glistening white within, snowy petals quivering as they unfurled, its loveliness eclipsing all around it. His sweet peach-

blossom eyes were clear and dewy. The curve of his nose was gentle and perfect: a little more would have seemed too harsh, and a little less would have looked too weak. His lips were red and full like a dew-laden cherry, and every word that tumbled from them was soft and sweet.

"Shizun, this disciple missed you so much."

Chu Wanning was caught by surprise. Shi Mei rarely ever expressed his feelings so openly. For a moment, he didn't know what to say. When he saw Shi Mei's eyes red-rimmed with emotion, Chu Wanning couldn't help feeling rather ashamed of himself. What was he getting jealous of Shi Mingjing for? He was so much older than him, and his superior to boot—why should he be jealous of Shi Mingjing?

He nodded and said mildly, "You may both rise."

His two disciples stood with his permission. Feelings freshly under control, Chu Wanning glanced at Shi Mei, then froze. He stared in mute confusion. Shi Mei was taller than Xue Meng? Chu Wanning choked a little, cleared his throat twice, and couldn't resist stealing a few more glances.

Not just a little taller, either. Shi Mei's figure was even more striking like this—broad shoulders, a slim waist and long legs, gentle and demure but with a subtle suggestion of assertiveness, an air of grace and elegance that defied words. This grown-up Shi Mei was nothing like the fragile adolescent he'd known before.

Despite himself, Chu Wanning's face fell again. He felt like he had lost this competition a little too woefully.

But…forget it. He had kept his feelings for Mo Ran to himself till the day he died, and there was no chance he'd confess them in the future. As for Mo Ran—that guy had chased him all the way to the underworld and still couldn't tell Chu Wanning liked him, so there was no chance he'd ever notice in times to come. The two would be no more than master and disciple for the rest of this life. That was a strong bond too. It was fine. As for anything beyond that…there was no point forcing something that wasn't meant to be.

Xue Meng, red-faced, nudged Shi Mei with his elbow and shot him a meaningful look.

Helpless, Shi Mei asked in a soft voice, “You really want me to do it?”

“Yeah, it’d be better if you do it.”

“But you’re the one who gathered all these things over five years…”

“Yeah, that’s why it’d be awkward for me to! You do it. Besides, you brought some stuff back with you today, right?”

“All right.” After some hesitation, Shi Mei sighed and acquiesced. He took hold of the huge rosewood box that Xue Meng had been hiding behind his back and carried it carefully in both hands as he walked over to Chu Wanning, who had already sat to continue eating his stewed crab meatball.

“Shizun, the young master and I…prepared some gifts over the past five years. Just some…small gestures. Please accept them.”

As Shi Mei spoke, Xue Meng’s face grew redder and redder. In an attempt to cover his fluster, he crossed his arms and looked away in feigned nonchalance, as if suddenly fascinated by the decoratively carved pillars of Mengpo Hall.

Generally speaking, opening a gift in front of the giver was considered impolite. But as their shizun didn’t want to accept something too valuable, he thought for a moment before asking, “What is it?”

“It’s…just some little things we picked up here and there.” Perceptive as he was, Shi Mei immediately apprehended Chu Wanning’s concerns. “Nothing expensive. Just take it to your room and open it there, if that’s what Shizun is worried about.”

“There’s no difference between opening it now or when I get back,” Chu Wanning countered. “I’ll just open it.”

“No no no! Don’t open it!” Xue Meng froze for an instant, then rushed over in a panic and tried to snatch back the box.

But Chu Wanning had already lifted the lid. He threw him an impassive look. “What are you running for. Don’t trip and fall.”

Xue Meng stared, aghast.

Sure enough, the box was stuffed with all sorts of interesting things: delicately embroidered hair ribbons, finely crafted hair

clasps, and intricate belt buckles of jade. Chu Wanning casually picked up a bottle of sedatives and spotted the seal of Hanlin the Sage glistening under the candlelight.

The contents of the box, all told, were quite costly indeed. Chu Wanning didn't know what to say and opted instead to shoot his disciple a glare. Xue Meng's face grew yet redder.

Xue Zhengyong watched from the sidelines, amused. "Yuheng, just accept it as a token of Meng-er's thoughtfulness. Anyway, the other elders all got you fairly pricey gifts too. What's one more?"

"Xue Meng is my disciple." Chu Wanning said firmly. It wouldn't be right to accept all this from someone under his own tutelage.

Hearing him say this, Xue Meng panicked. "It's just stuff I picked out over the last five years that I thought would suit Shizun! And I only spent money I earned myself, not a cent of my dad's. Shizun, if you don't take it, I…I…"

"He'll be upset, won't be able to sleep," Xue Zhengyong supplied. "Might even go on a hunger strike."

Chu Wanning eyed them both. He really didn't know how to handle this father-son duo. He looked back down and noticed another, even smaller wooden box within the pile of gifts. "What's this…" He picked it up and opened the delicate lid to reveal four little clay figurines.

Bewildered, he glanced up at Xue Meng to find that his disciple's face was currently the color of a ripe tomato. Catching Chu Wanning's gaze, Xue Meng hastily lowered his head. The handsome young man acted like a bashful little boy under his shizun's stare, unable to make eye contact.

"What is this?" Chu Wanning asked again.

Xue Zhengyong was curious as well. "Let's have a look."

"No…don't…" Xue Meng mumbled helplessly, clapping a hand to his forehead. But his old man had already cheerfully removed the four little clay dolls and arranged them in a neat row. The little figurines were crudely made, ugly and crooked, and all looked much the same but for one being slightly taller and the other three being slightly smaller. Xue Meng's handiwork, to be sure. He had

originally wanted to learn the mechanical arts from Chu Wanning, but within a day, Chu Wanning had insisted he switch to the blade. The reason was simple: after an entire afternoon spent in the Red Lotus Pavilion, the boy had managed to assemble absolutely nothing, but *had* nearly managed to demolish the machine room with only a file. It must've been painstaking work to form these clay dolls with only the power of his pure heart.

Xue Zhengyong plucked up one of the dolls and looked it over, turning it this way and that, but still wasn't sure what he was looking at. "This thing you made, what is it?"

"N-nothing," Xue Meng said stubbornly. "I was just messing around."

"This black one is really ugly; the taller white one looks much better," Xue Zhengyong mumbled as he thumbed at the little clay doll's head.

"Don't touch it!"

But it was too late. The little doll spoke: "Hands off, Uncle."

Xue Zhengyong stared, speechless.

Chu Wanning also stared, also speechless.

Xue Meng gave himself a sound slap, then covered his eyes with his arms; he couldn't bear to look any longer.

It took Xue Zhengyong a long minute to put two and two together, but when he did, he laughed out loud. "Oho, Meng-er, is this supposed to be Ran-er? Didn't you make him a bit too ugly? Ha ha ha ha!"

“That’s ’cause he *is* ugly!” Xue Meng shot back angrily. “Look at the Shizun I made instead! Pretty, right?!” His face was bright red as he pointed at the white-painted clay doll.

But the tip of his finger inadvertently brushed the little doll’s head. It hmph’d coldly and said, “Don’t be impudent.”

Chu Wanning truly could not think of a single thing to say.

Xue Zhengyong laughed so hard he nearly cried. “That’s pretty good, pretty good! You laid a voice charm on them, didn’t you? The little one’s actually doing a pretty good impression of Yuheng, ha ha ha ha!”

Chu Wanning flicked his sleeves. “Ridiculous.” But he carefully picked up the four clay dolls, tucked them back into the box, and set it beside him. His face, calm as ever, betrayed nothing. But when he looked back up, there was a hint of lingering gentleness in his eyes. “I’ll take this one; you can keep the rest. They’re all things you can use too, and this master isn’t wanting for any of them.”

“But…”

“Young master, do as Shizun says.” Shi Mei smiled and consoled him quietly, then lowered his voice further to say, “What the young master most wanted to gift were the little dolls, right?”

Xue Meng was so furious there was practically smoke rising from his head. He shot Shi Mei a glare, stomped his foot, then bit his lip and refused to say another word.

Xue Meng had always been flattered and fawned on growing up; there was nothing he couldn’t say and nothing he couldn’t do. If he liked or disliked something, he’d always express his thoughts loudly and frankly. For this reason, Chu Wanning felt that he was extraordinary. This kind of candor was something he himself had never possessed, and it was one of Xue Meng’s most remarkable qualities. He envied it.

That openness was thoroughly foreign to him, a person who could never be honest and claimed not to care about something even as it wholly occupied his thoughts. He had gotten a bit better about it since his return to life, but his character was what it was, and the changes weren’t terribly noticeable. A river needed more

than a single cold day to freeze three feet deep; in this respect, he felt like he would probably never manage significant change, even if he were to try for the rest of his life. Besides, he wouldn't really be the same person if he changed too much.

The banquet was nearly at an end, but Mo Ran still had not returned. Chu Wanning's chest felt stuffy, but he said nothing. He really wanted to ask Xue Zhengyong what exactly Mo Ran had written in that letter he'd sent. He wanted to ask if he knew exactly where Mo Ran was right now.

Instead, he gripped his wine cup and downed one drink after another, his knuckles white with tension. The wine burned all the way down. But it did not burn enough to warm his heart, nor enough for him to summon the courage to turn around and ask when Mo Ran would be back.

Chapter 127:
Shizun, Careful, the Ground's Slippery

BUT CHU WANNING didn't ask, and Xue Zhengyong didn't raise it. In fact, the sect leader of Sisheng Peak was on his way to getting rather plastered, light-headed and slurring his words. He leaned over, stared at Chu Wanning, and said, "Yuheng, you're upset."

"I am not."

"You're mad."

"I am not," Chu Wanning repeated.

"Who upset you?"

Chu Wanning fell silent. Should he ask? He'd feel a lot better if he just asked. Maybe Mo Ran didn't actually say he'd definitely be back tonight, maybe he only said he'd try his best, and Xue Zhengyong reported it wrong, or remembered it wrong…

Chu Wanning glanced toward the door, at the black night outside. The banquet was coming to a close, and the seats would soon be cold.

His first day out of seclusion, and Mo Ran hadn't made it back in time. Every single disciple of Sisheng Peak was here, including those whose names he didn't know and those he'd never even met. It was only him who was missing. But without him present, the banquet was incomplete. And all the stewed crab meatballs, sweet osmanthus lotus root, and fragrant pear blossom white wine in the world wouldn't make it complete. Chu Wanning closed his eyes.

There came a sudden ruckus from the direction of Mengpo Hall's front entrance, and a bunch of disciples yelled excitedly in the distance.

"Aiya—! Look! What's that outside?"

"There's something in the sky!"

The commotion drew more and more people. Now even those in the hall could hear the lively crackling and thunderous booms from the outside, one after another. They walked out to the verdant

lawn outside Mengpo Hall, looking up at the sky lit by fireworks, a million glittering specks blooming and scattering against the backdrop of the starry night.

"Fireworks!" The younger disciples beamed. Their youthful faces were illuminated by the flickering lights above, the skyful of stars reflected in their eyes.

"It's so pretty! I've never seen fireworks this big, not even at New Year's!"

Chu Wanning slowly walked out from the hall as well. His mood was gloomy; grateful as he was that Xue Zhengyong had gone to the trouble of preparing such a brilliant fireworks show, the heaviness in his chest weighed on him.

A sharp whistling sound pierced the night. He lifted his head listlessly and saw a streak of golden-red light shooting into the open sky like an arrow loosed from its bow. How beautiful. If only that person were here too…

Bang!

That brilliant flare flew level with the Big Dipper's handle before bursting across the sky in countless glittering sparkles, eclipsing the stars of the Milky Way and stealing the light from the moon itself. The fireworks scattered like so many haitang petals set adrift by a rustling breeze, floating and dancing like wintry snow, glimmering and rippling like open water. Amidst the splendid display and lively bustle of the crowd, Chu Wanning slowly closed his eyes.

"Disciple Mo Ran welcomes Shizun back from seclusion."

These words came from behind him all of a sudden, every syllable clear and needle-like.

Chu Wanning began to tremble minutely. He felt as if there were thorns in his back, fire in his throat. Unable to breathe, with his heart beating out of rhythm and blood racing through his veins, he whipped his head around.

Standing behind him were a handful of disciples who had just emerged from Mengpo Hall. All were gazing at the sky in amazement, and one of them had been reading aloud.

And then it wasn't just one person reading these words

anymore. Everyone found it novel and interesting. Everyone, down to the youngest disciples, the men and the women, those standing alone and those in groups, all of them were looking up at the glittering, resplendent night sky and reading out loud:

Disciple Mo Ran welcomes Shizun back from seclusion.

The utterances carried a tenderness like the tide, gentle as slumbrous whispers; the words bespoke determination like a boulder, firm as the mighty mountains. Chu Wanning's head snapped skyward, where the brilliant fireworks, guided by spiritual energy, had spelled one sentence in huge, shimmering letters across the night sky.

The fireworks formed a magnificent river that could doubtless be seen for hundreds of miles. In that moment, in that night, Chu Wanning felt as if the vivid, glistering specks were converging on him from across hills and mountains, across the breadth of time, bringing with them that one person's joys and sorrows, longings and regrets. He suddenly felt like a piece of driftwood afloat in the ocean, and the ocean was Mo Ran's eyes—the way they had looked when he pulled Chu Wanning into his arms before the ghost king's palace in the underworld, full of tender warmth, fiery passion, and unwavering determination.

There was nowhere to run. He was surrounded by that person's murmurs, that person's laughter, that person's affection. Chu Wanning didn't want to consider what kind of affection it was —that of a master and disciple, or something more. Just having it was enough.

Mo Ran didn't manage to make it back before the end of the banquet. It was simply too far away, even traveling through the night without stopping. But he still had in his bag the signal fireworks made by the Xuanji Elder that he'd been given for emergencies, should he meet with some mishap while off the peak. It was an ingenious creation: by writing a message on paper with spiritual energy, placing it in the tube, and setting off the firework, one could project a message across the sky in bold letters so large they would be visible from Sisheng Peak, no matter how far the sender.

The signal fireworks were costly and exceedingly difficult to construct, but Mo Ran didn't care about that. He only wanted to

ensure his shizun wouldn't be upset. Even across mountains and rivers, even separated by time and circumstance, he had to make sure Chu Wanning could hear these words:

Disciple Mo Ran welcomes Shizun back from seclusion.

The banquet came to a close four hours later. By the time Chu Wanning got back to the Red Lotus Pavilion, the night was late, and he smelled of wine. He wanted to take a bath to wash off, but the weather had gotten cool of late and the water in the pavilion's lotus pond was too chilly for bathing—he'd nearly caught a cold washing there yesterday. After a moment's thought, he stepped inside to fetch a change of clothes and a wooden washtub, then headed toward Melodic Springs.

Melodic Springs was the sect's communal bath, though he'd only ever used it in his first few months at Sisheng Peak. Hardly anyone would be bathing this late at night. Lifting the thin hemp curtain with one hand, Chu Wanning strode in.

Many parts of Sisheng Peak had been renovated over the years, but Melodic Springs was unchanged. High, black-tiled walls rose on all sides, and lightly drifting sheer veils lined the winding corridor that led from the front gate to a flight of six narrow wooden steps lacquered with a clear varnish. Bathers would remove their shoes and socks before descending the stairs, so at one glance anyone could tell how many people were currently soaking in the baths. While taking off his own, Chu Wanning saw that there was only one other pair of boots here—fairly large and a little dirty, but placed neatly in the corner rather than carelessly tossed to the ground just because it was empty.

Chu Wanning wondered who else had come here to bathe this late at night. But it was only a fleeting thought. Holding his small washtub, he walked barefoot down the steps, brushed aside the last set of curtains at the end of the path, and walked into the courtyard.

The courtyard was hazy with steam, which rose from the massive hot spring that cascaded down from a broad, rumbling waterfall and spilled over the rocks into tiered pools. The thick, cloudy steam gently unfurled out from the pool, drifting slowly, filling every corner and crevice and killing visibility. A person had

to get very close to another to see their face. Chu Wanning followed the little footpath of smooth, colorful pebbles under the luxuriant canopy of flowering peach blossoms until he reached the closest entrance to the baths. A low shelf carved from bluestone had been placed there to hold bathers' clothes. He put his wooden washtub and robe on the shelf, then undressed and waded slowly into the spring.

It was pleasantly warm. Chu Wanning couldn't help the soft sigh of contentment that escaped him. If not for his reluctance to brave the crowds who bathed here, or otherwise only come this late every day, he'd really rather bathe here than the cold waters of the Red Lotus Pavilion's simple pond. Truly Xue Zhengyong was fastidious and thorough. He had personally overseen the construction of Melodic Springs; flowers bloomed along the borders of the pool year-round, and there was a waterfall at the end of the pond for rinsing. There was even a small wooden pavilion at the hot spring's side to lie down and rest in after soaking, furnished with heated stones meant to be placed along the meridians to relieve pressure. This was vastly more indulgent than the rushed bath he'd had to make do with yesterday at the Red Lotus Pavilion.

In his delight, and seeing that there was no one else around, Chu Wanning let loose for a moment, extending his slender limbs and swimming all the way to the waterfall with a splash.

He had only just risen from the water and wiped his face, a faint smile still hovering on his lips, when he suddenly noticed a man very close to him, showering in the surging waterfall with his back turned.

The waterfall was so loud that Chu Wanning hadn't heard the other person at all, even this close by. If he had come out of the water a little later, swum a little further, the tips of his fingers probably would've brushed the man's legs.

Good thing he had stood up when he did and hadn't accidentally touched this stranger. But he was still inappropriately close—practically standing right behind the other man.

This person was very tall, quite a bit taller than Chu Wanning, and his sun-kissed skin was the color of honey, making him seem wild and unrestrained. His shoulders were strong and broad, and the shoulder blades that flexed beneath his golden skin hinted at a

concealed strength with each lift of his arms. He wasn't overly muscular but sculpted and evenly toned. The water cascaded over his body, rivulets gathering into streams to flow down the wide expanse of his powerful, masculine back. Some of the spring water splashed off, but more seemed infatuated with his body, clinging to him in a light sheen, loath to part.

As someone accustomed to asceticism, Chu Wanning had never seen such a carnal sight. His ears burned as he hastily turned to leave.

Heaven only knew whether it was the bottom of the spring that was too slippery or if it was Chu Wanning who took a false step. He stumbled and fell face-first into the pool, sending a spray of water into the air.

"Cough cough!"

Chu Wanning's face was red with embarrassment, and he inadvertently swallowed a mouthful of water in his fluster. When he remembered that it was technically bathwater from that guy behind him, he became so indignant and disgusted that he discarded all appearance of calm and composure, scrambling and flailing as he tried to find his footing.

He was *the* Yuheng Elder, how could—

In his panic, and with no dignity left to speak of, a strong, shapely hand grabbed him and pulled him up from the streaming water. The man had obviously been startled by what had happened just behind him.

"Are you okay?" The man spoke in a deep, soothing voice, one hand around Chu Wanning's arm. The difference in their heights was such that his breath puffed against Chu Wanning's ear as he lowered his head to speak, "Careful, it's slippery here."

Chu Wanning's ears burned even hotter. He could sense that man's chest behind him, mere inches from his back, rising and falling, up and down. Each time it fell, a merciful relief like it had spared his life; each time it rose, a menacing precarity as it threatened to brush against his back. Chu Wanning was both indignant and mortified at once—never had he been touched by someone like this!

He shook off the man's hand, expression surly and eyes aimed

determinedly away from the stranger. “I’m fine.”

The deafening rush of the waterfall all but masked Chu Wanning’s voice. But for some reason the man jolted at the sound, falling entirely still before slowly lifting his hand like he wanted to say something, but didn’t quite have the courage…

In that brief moment of hesitation, Chu Wanning had already opened a wide gap between them and stepped into—or rather, hid inside—the rushing, roaring curtain of water.

Chapter 128:
Shizun, You Can't Just Wear Whatever Clothes You Feel Like

CHU WANNING'S HEART raced, and he was so mad his face flushed. He could see, from the corner of his eye, that the man was still standing frozen in the same spot. Despite not looking directly at him, Chu Wanning could *feel* the man's stare, open and brazen, like a sword raised from the crucible—still hissing with an overwhelming heat that vaporized the curtain of water and pierced right through to him. Though he couldn't say why, he felt absolutely scandalized. With an increasingly sour expression, he bit down on his lip and retreated even farther into the waterfall.

But it turned out this guy was a *moron.* As Chu Wanning scrambled backward to hide, the man took a step forward like a puppet on a string.

Chu Wanning was furious. There were always a couple of perverts at Sisheng Peak; there had even once been a woman who, instead of going to sleep in her bed like a normal person, had crawled onto the roof at the Red Lotus Pavilion to peep at him bathing. Just thinking about it made his scalp go numb, and gooseflesh rose along the arm that had been grabbed by that guy.

Fortunately, after he'd retreated into the waterfall as deep as he could go—inadvertently swallowing more than a few gulps of the water in the process—the man finally decided to leave him be, returning to the streaming water to continue rinsing himself, though he looked back several times.

Chu Wanning tamped down his anger the best he could; he was in no mood to soak in the baths anymore; his only thought was to finish up and get out of there as soon as possible. He reached for the towel draped over his shoulder, only to realize that the towel, together with the soap-bean bar and fragrance bar wrapped inside, had fallen into the water during his great tumble earlier.

They'd probably dissolved away by now. Should he get out to fetch a new one? But he was naked, and getting out would involve

walking past that guy.

Chu Wanning's face had gone from red to blue. He pressed his thin lips together, mortified. He was *not* going. Like an idiot, he remained standing with his arms crossed over his chest and his back to the rock, letting the water wash over him in the deepest part of the waterfall.

Chu Wanning stood there, silent, unmoving. So did that other man.

On the other side of the streaming water, that guy spoke up to ask hesitantly, "Would you like a soap-bean bar?"

He received no reply.

"And fragrance bars?"

Again, no reply.

"Surely you're not going to just wash like that?"

Staying right where he was, Chu Wanning closed his eyes and replied coldly, "Toss them over, then."

But the man didn't toss the bars over—perhaps he thought it would be rude to do so with a stranger. After a short delay, Chu Wanning watched a peach leaf enchanted with spiritual power drift slowly toward him under the waterfall, bearing a soap-bean bar and two fragrance bars.

Chu Wanning picked up the items but paused upon taking a closer look. The soap-bean bar was as it always was, since everyone used basically the same thing. But the stranger had picked out a plum-blossom-scented fragrance bar and a haitang-scented one, Chu Wanning's favorites.

He couldn't help but glance at the tall figure in the distance through the sparkling, translucent curtain of water.

"Those two scents okay?" the man asked.

"Fine," Chu Wanning replied.

The man said no more, and the two continued their baths in silence within their separate, distant corners, each occupied with his own thoughts. Chu Wanning began to feel a little more at ease as he washed. Cautiously, he stepped back out from the depths of the waterfall; the stream where he was standing was actually a bit

too strong for comfort.

But the man looked over again the instant he emerged. It would've been one thing if he just *looked*, but there was something weird in his stare. Chu Wanning got the distinct impression that the man wanted to say something but was stopping himself, and that he was wavering between coming closer or staying back. His skin prickled all over.

Chu Wanning washed for a bit until he finally couldn't take it anymore and decided to leave first. But he had left his clothes at the entrance, and he'd have to go back that way to get dressed. Chu Wanning could do nothing but brace himself as he walked toward the man with his face sullen and teeth gritted.

As he waded past the man, not too close but also not too far, that guy unexpectedly also started to move, pulling up his long hair and shaking the water from his bangs to follow Chu Wanning out of the bath.

A vein in Chu Wanning's temple throbbed. He started moving faster, but that man was astoundingly shameless—he started moving faster as well.

The vein in Chu Wanning's temple throbbed harder. The tips of his fingers had already begun to glow with the golden light of Tianwen, but he held back from summoning his weapon—not because he was concerned about injuring someone, but solely because he felt that he should get dressed before beating anyone up. He started wading even faster.

This time, the man stopped instead of continuing to tail him. Chu Wanning sighed in relief, but had only let out half a breath before he heard the man say from behind him, "There are…soap bubbles in your hair."

Chu Wanning froze.

"Aren't you gonna rinse it off?"

Chu Wanning burned with anger. The man approached slowly, not stopping until he was very close—right behind, where his voice could be clearly heard. If Chu Wanning hadn't been so furious, he would've noticed that the voice was familiar, despite its change in timbre. Unfortunately, he was at present engulfed by the flames of rage.

"You…" The man seemed to still have something more to say.

But Chu Wanning had reached the limits of his forbearance. He whipped around, golden light flashing to life in his palm as he lashed out with an audible *whoosh*, a dangerous glint in his eyes. Chu Wanning was so enraged that he was tempted to kill this guy and be done with it. "What the hell is *wrong* with you?!"

Tianwen ripped through the hazy steam, snapping directly toward the other man's chest. For an instant, the golden glow lit his face. Chu Wanning saw a pair of eyes—clear, gentle, sheepish eyes that seemed to hold flowing rivers of stars, like so many glimmering fireflies on the wind, yet were also tranquil as still, deep waters, veiling bygone things beneath.

Mo Ran?!

He tried to pull back, but it was too late; the willow vine hissed as it struck Mo Ran's firm, glistening chest. Mo Ran only let out a stifled grunt and ducked his head a little. When he looked back up, his eyes held not the slightest trace of anger or resentment, but were a little wet, as if washed by the first rains of Lin'an.

Chu Wanning recalled Tianwen and stood frozen in place. A long interval passed before he managed a hoarse, "Why didn't you dodge?"

Mo Ran replied, "Sh-Shizun…"

Chu Wanning was stunned. He had imagined so many times how the two of them might meet again, but never did he think it would be at Melodic Springs, in the hot spring pool. "What're you doing here? When did you get back?!"

"I just did," Mo Ran replied softly. "I was too dirty and unpresentable from rushing to get here, so I came to take a bath before going to see Shizun. I didn't expect…"

For a moment, Chu Wanning was speechless. Neither of them had expected something like this to happen. They had both wished for their reunion to be proper and dignified. Mo Ran had probably, at the very least, wanted to appear before Chu Wanning clean and well-dressed.

But in the end? Not only was their meeting not proper, it was straight-up laughable.

Not only was it not dignified, it was absolutely ridiculous.

Not only were they not well-dressed, they were both completely naked.

They *were* clean though. So clean they didn't have a single stitch on.

"Shizun, it's really… It's really you…"

Mo Ran, for his part, didn't care much for these things. For five years, Chu Wanning had slept, and he had been awake; what had only spanned the length of a dream for Chu Wanning had been more than a thousand torturous days for him. His frame of mind was far more complicated than Chu Wanning's. Forcing down his surging emotions, the rims of his eyes a little red, he said, "It's been so long that I, just now…I didn't dare believe my eyes. I thought I might've had the wrong person, I thought…"

Head ringing, Chu Wanning was at a loss for words. It was a long moment before he said, "Why didn't you just ask me if you weren't sure? Instead of silently creeping after me like that."

"I did want to ask," Mo Ran said softly, "but it's been five years…and then to suddenly…see Shizun right in front of me, I thought… I thought I was dreaming…"

As I approach home my nervousness grows, I dare not ask even those passing by.[6]

Those lines likely described what he felt when he first saw that familiar silhouette. He'd dreamt such dreams too many times in the past five years; he was afraid it was more of the same madness, and that he would wake with tear stains on his pillow to find that the reunion he'd seen was just another joyous delusion.

Chu Wanning maintained a calm exterior, but his insides were a roiling mess. It was hard work, really, to speak so stiffly and dryly while his heart felt so soft and gooey. "What kind of dream could be this absurd?"

Mo Ran stilled for a beat at Chu Wanning's response, as if he'd remembered something. He pressed his lips together, and a light flickered in his eyes. He hadn't planned to bring this up the moment they met again, but he realized after some hesitation that if he didn't say it now, while Chu Wanning hadn't yet had a chance to

rebuild his walls, he probably wouldn't get another chance.

So he said, after a pause, "…Does Shizun not remember?"

"Remember what?"

Mo Ran's eyes were deep and dark. "What you said to me before—that the most wonderful dreams are rarely ever true."

"That was because…" Chu Wanning caught himself mid-sentence, suddenly recognizing the words he had spoken to Mo Ran at Jincheng Lake as he rescued him from the blood hourglass. Back then, he'd uttered this melancholic sentiment in the depths of his own misery. He was a little surprised Mo Ran remembered it so clearly after all these years.

But—how did Mo Ran know it had actually been him at Jincheng Lake? Had Shi Mei told him?

Chu Wanning lifted his eyes to peek at him and found himself meeting Mo Ran's steady gaze. Only then did he realize that Mo Ran hadn't actually known the truth and had only said it to gauge his reaction.

"So it really was Shizun, then," Mo Ran said softly.

Chu Wanning kept his mouth shut.

Mo Ran raised a hand. His chest had been slashed open, and blood seeped from the wound. He smiled wryly. "Over these last few years, I've done a lot of thinking about the past. I wanted to understand just how much Shizun had done for me. I thought back on a lot of things, including the illusion at Jincheng Lake. Shi Mei never calls me by my full name."

He paused before continuing. "The more I thought, the more those memories tormented me. There were a lot of things I wanted to ask Shizun about once you woke."

Chu Wanning watched him silently.

"But the thing I wanted to ask about the most was… Shizun, the one who saved me at the bottom of the lake back then—it was you, wasn't it?"

Mo Ran stepped closer as he spoke. Chu Wanning wanted to back away. He'd suddenly realized just how tall Mo Ran had become, like a mountain, with powerful strength latent in every

inch of his body. He'd suddenly realized just how bright Mo Ran's eyes were, like the very sun had fallen into those twin pools, all the colors of dawn splashed across those gleaming waters.

Chu Wanning found himself flustered for no reason whatsoever. He said, "It wasn't me."

Mo Ran didn't buy it at all.

Grasping desperately at straws, Chu Wanning scrambled to change the subject, but he was so startled, so nervous and so discomfited, that he completely forgot about the question he'd already asked, and which Mo Ran had already answered. Looking at the bleeding gash he'd inflicted, he asked once more, "Why didn't you dodge when I struck you earlier?"

Mo Ran fell still for a second, then dropped his thick curtain of lashes with a smile, answering once more: "You said that dreams that were too good to be true probably weren't." He paused, before continuing at a murmur: "I wanted to see if it would hurt. If it hurts, then it's not a dream."

He walked over and stood right in front of Chu Wanning. Maybe it was because of how sudden their reunion had been, but in his heart, the joy and fondness and tenderness and heartbreak overtook all. Mo Ran thought of nothing else, no flights of fancy. He even forgot that he was supposed to maintain a proper distance from Chu Wanning. He'd had every intention of keeping that arm's length of propriety between a disciple and his master.

But he didn't. Whenever his emotions ran deep, he'd always think of the person before him as Wanning rather than Shizun.

Mo Ran's eyes grew still more red and teary. He lifted an arm with a grin—"I think some water got in my eyes just now"—and scrubbed at his face.

Chu Wanning stared up at him in a daze. All this time he'd been anticipating Mo Ran's return, so he was a little more clearheaded than his disciple right now, but that portion of clarity also afforded him the presence of mind to notice their current condition—talking face-to-face while buck naked. And not only that; Mo Ran was so close that, were he to come just a bit closer, he'd be able to wrap his arms around Chu Wanning the way he had back in the underworld.

Chu Wanning didn't want to continue looking up at Mo Ran's unfairly handsome face. But when he dropped his gaze a few inches, the sight that greeted him was one of broad shoulders and a firm chest, the blood from Tianwen's lash spreading slowly, and droplets of water shivering minutely with every breath Mo Ran drew. Chu Wanning couldn't tell which was hotter, that sculpted chest or the water of the hot springs. All he knew was that he was surrounded by Mo Ran's scent, and that it was going to steal away his soul.

"Shizun, I…"

He what? Before Mo Ran could say any more, Chu Wanning turned on his heel and took off running. Mo Ran was flabbergasted —he was literally *running*. He'd never before seen Chu Wanning fleeing like this, running away like whatever was behind him was gonna eat him alive and chew up his soul.

"…I've really missed you so much." Mo Ran finished limply. He stood where he was, pursing his lips. What had he run away for… He felt a little wronged.

When he got out of the pool and spied Chu Wanning, whose face alternated between hues of red and blue as he scrambled frantically to get dressed, he felt even more wronged. "Shizun," he mumbled.

Chu Wanning ignored him.

"Shizun…"

Chu Wanning continued to ignore him while wrapping the belt sash around his waist.

"Shizunnnn…"

"What?!" Dressed at long last, Chu Wanning finally let out a breath. He felt his dignity and composure return to his body now that it was covered. His sword-straight brows slanted in anger, and his stern phoenix eyes glared fiercely at the traitorous disciple who dared exceed him in height. "What's so important that you can't wait till we're outside to say it?! Talking to me naked like that, have you no shame?!"

A little chagrined, Mo Ran raised a fist to his lips and cleared his throat. "…It's not like I want to be naked."

“Then why aren’t you getting dressed!”

Mo Ran paused, fixing his gaze on a peach tree near the side of the pool as he began. “So, it’s like this…” He took a deep breath, then finally steeled himself to say: “Shizun, those are my clothes you’re wearing.”

A faint blush spread across Mo Ran’s cheeks as he stared intently at a branch of peach blossoms swaying in the gentle breeze.

Chapter 129:
Shizun, Do You Like What You See?

IN THAT SPLIT SECOND, chaos swam in Chu Wanning's head like the churning of the seas, the lashing of torrential rains, the booming of thunder, the flashing of lightning, the darkening of clouds.

To take them off or to keep them on—a most dire question. Keeping them on seemed inappropriate, now that he knew he had put on the wrong clothes. And it wasn't like he could pretend he hadn't heard what Mo Ran said.

Taking them off…?

He couldn't possibly handle the embarrassment of taking off the clothes he'd finally put on, piece by piece, with Mo Ran right there.

A few moments passed in an awkward silence. Mo Ran said at last, "But I've washed those clothes quite thoroughly. They're very clean, so if Shizun doesn't mind, then…please feel free to wear them."

"Mn."

Mo Ran let out a breath of relief. He'd always been a bit slow on the uptake. He hadn't realized until after he'd spoken that revealing the truth when Chu Wanning was already mostly dressed would be nothing short of forcing his shizun to strip in front of him. He was singed by the mere spark of that mental image, and his face burned redder. Luckily, he'd roamed far and wide these last couple years and was no longer so tender-skinned as he had been. The blush wasn't as noticeable on his cheeks tanned the golden of wheat. But his heartbeats felt too loud by half, and his conscience heaved with fear and guilt that Chu Wanning would hear. He hurriedly bowed his head and made to pick up Chu Wanning's robes to clothe himself.

After both were dressed, they looked at each other again, only to fall into a different kind of awkward silence.

The clothes didn't fit.

Chu Wanning's robes were clearly too small for Mo Ran. They didn't even overlap in the front, leaving exposed a large expanse of firm, honey-colored chest. And too short, as well: the way half his legs were left uncovered like he was flat broke was admittedly a sorry look.

Chu Wanning fared no better: Mo Ran's robes draped over him, covering him from neck to toe and pooling on the ground to trail behind him like a wisp of white mist. It looked fine and proper, but it also made obvious how much shorter he was than Mo Ran now. Chu Wanning felt rather affronted. Face sullen, he said, "Leaving"—meaning, *I'm leaving.*

But Mo Ran misunderstood and thought he was inviting him to leave together. Thus he nodded and picked up his shizun's wooden washtub and change of clothes, earnestly following him.

The two reached the entrance of the baths and lifted the curtain. Outside, away from the hot springs, it was considerably cooler, and Chu Wanning shivered in the autumn chill despite himself. When Mo Ran noticed, he asked, "Are you cold?"

"No."

But how could Mo Ran not know by now that this was merely his pride speaking? He said with a smile, "Well *I'm* a little cold," and lifted a hand in a practiced gesture. With a flourish, a scarlet glow sprang from his palm to form a cold-warding barrier around the pair of them. The barrier was beautiful, its radiance shimmering and flowing, with a scatter of flower motifs at the top.

Face unreadable, Chu Wanning glanced up at it. "Not bad. You've improved."

"I'm still nowhere near a match for Shizun."

"You're not far off. My cold-warding barriers are probably no better than this." Chu Wanning gazed at the barrier, and, noticing the faint flowers, commented, "The peach blossoms are a nice touch."

"They're haitang blossoms."

Chu Wanning's heart trembled, sending ripples refracting through the depths of his eyes.

Mo Ran continued, "Five petals."

For a moment, Chu Wanning was stunned, then couldn't help the puff of laughter that escaped as he tried instinctively to hide the quivering in his eyes with feigned nonchalance. In a slightly mocking tone he said, "Copying me now, are we?"

But to his surprise, Mo Ran only looked at him guilelessly and nodded in response. "It's a poor imitation, I'm afraid."

Chu Wanning was left rather speechless.

They walked side by side in silence for a while before Chu Wanning picked up his pace; he didn't want to be right next to him like this. Behind him, Mo Ran suddenly asked, "Shizun, are you… mad I didn't make it back in time for the banquet?"

"No."

"Really?"

"Why would I bother lying?"

"Then why are you walking so fast?"

Of course Chu Wanning wasn't going to say, *Because you're too tall*. He was silent for a moment, then looked up at the sky and lied, "Because it looks like it's going to rain."

As if he'd jinxed it, drops of rain presently started falling from the overcast sky, pitter-pattering into a curtain.

Mo Ran smiled. His smile was every bit as lovely as it had been five years ago, yet now more dazzling for its newfound sincerity. Chu Wanning glared at him. "What's with that stupid grin?"

"Nothing." Mo Ran's dimples were deep and sweet. The young man, tall and sturdy, returned his gaze with downcast lashes and a docile, obedient demeanor devoid of arrogance. He was even a little bashful as he said, "I'm just really happy to see Shizun again after so long."

In silence, Chu Wanning stared at him, at the dimples adorning his cheeks. He had once thought those twin pools of sweetness would ever belong to Shi Mingjing alone, but it turned out that wasn't so—to be allowed a jar of that sweetness himself, all he had to do was give up his life.

"Dummy," Chu Wanning chided him.

Mo Ran let his long, soft lashes droop and grinned big and wide, exactly like a dummy. But as he got a little carried away in the moment, he accidentally trod on Chu Wanning's hem, which he'd been so careful to avoid this whole time.

Chu Wanning, his expression stern, looked at the ground and then at Mo Ran, but said nothing.

Mo Ran was very straightforward. "The clothes are a little big on Shizun."

He sure knew what *not* to say.

Mo Ran walked Chu Wanning all the way back to the Red Lotus Pavilion. In all honesty, Chu Wanning found it a rather strange experience. It was always his way to come and go alone; he'd rarely ever had the occasion to share an umbrella, be it of oilpaper or magic. So, halfway there, he stopped and said, "I can do it myself, it's just a barrier."

Mo Ran was a little taken aback. "Wasn't it fine until now? So why…"

"What kind of master makes their disciple hold the umbrella?"

There was a moment of silence. "But Shizun has done so much for me," Mo Ran said, his voice low and quiet. "These last five years, I spent every single day hoping to become just a little bit better. Shizun is so capable and can do everything by himself, so I wanted to be able to do just a little more than Shizun. That way I could be of use to Shizun, repay Shizun. But even after all the training and studying I've done, I still feel no closer to that goal. I'm afraid I might never be able to repay Shizun's kindness. That's why…"

He bowed his head, hand unconsciously clenching into a fist at his side. The rainwater gathered in streaming rivulets on the ground, droplets splashing and rippling like blooming flowers. "That's why I ask that, from now on, Shizun let me take care of the little things—like holding the umbrella."

Chu Wanning said nothing, watching him quietly.

"I want to hold an umbrella over Shizun for as long as I live."

As he listened silently, Chu Wanning felt a burning in his chest. It was such a heartwarming thing to hear, yet he found

himself wanting to cry. He was someone who had undergone so much suffering and braved it all; like a traveler who had walked for too long and had finally found shelter where they could lie down and rest. Even his bones felt like they might fall apart as he collapsed.

For a lifetime.

Mo Ran was twenty-two this year. The saying went that time passed differently once someone was past twenty. Before one was twenty, a mere three or five years felt so long it could be called a lifetime. But past that, time would feel like a racing current, everything surging past in a rush with no return. Mo Ran was saying he would step out of the racing current to hold an umbrella over him.

Chu Wanning had so rarely received kindness that this flood of tenderness felt like pain instead. He studied Mo Ran, studied that person standing with his head bowed, and said, “Mo Ran, look at me.”

Mo Ran lifted his head.

“Say that again.”

Mo Ran gazed at him. His face was still somewhat alien to Chu Wanning; it was different from the one in his memories, and different from the one in those absurd dreams he’d once had. This face was gentle, composed, and steadfast, bearing both the warmth of fire and the firmness of iron as he met Chu Wanning’s eyes with neither hesitation nor avoidance.

When Chu Wanning had looked at Mo Ran for the last time five years ago, he had yet been a growing boy. In a blink, he had grown into the handsome, confident man before him. A man who was dropping to one knee, looking up at him, and saying, “Shizun, I want to hold an umbrella over you for as long as I live.”

Chu Wanning stared at him in a daze: at those dark eyebrows and that shapely jawline, at those bright eyes and that straight nose. He had grown into an impressive pine tree, matching Chu Wanning’s height before overtaking him. One day, the tree that was Chu Wanning, which had stood in the wind and rain for so long, woke up, blinked, and found that the rain had ceased, the clouds had dispersed, and in the soft light of the sun, there was another

tree standing beside him, even taller and steadier than he. When the wind rustled through its leaves, the sunlight filtered through like gold dust.

This tree said he wanted to stand by his side for a lifetime, until they both fell over, branches bare and withered. But with every season that passed until then, he would never again be alone.

As he stared, Chu Wanning was struck with the realization that Mo Ran was no longer the bloodied, unconscious disciple he had carried back from Butterfly Town five years ago. Standing there in the rain, under the haitang blossoms dancing atop the barrier, he seemed to see Mo Ran for the first time, studying him thoroughly and carefully, looking at this man who was promising him a lifetime.

Chu Wanning's heart began to race. He suddenly noticed how alluring Mo Ran looked now, from the line of his nose to the shape of his lips, from the curve of his jaw to the jut of his throat.

What he had felt for Mo Ran before was only love, which could be kept hidden. But right now, this man felt like nothing short of a fire to him, a fire that could too easily set him ablaze like he was mere kindling, sending flames soaring up to scorch the skies. Magma that had lain dormant all this time stirred awake and stretched its limbs in the abyss deep within himself, ready to burst in a violent eruption at any time. It threatened to burn through all the reservations, dignity, and restraint on which he had always prided himself…

Threatened to burn it all to ash, until there was nothing left.

Chapter 130:
Shizun, I've Crossed Five Years to Come See You

CHU WANNING'S breathing was a little heavy, his throat a little dry. He refused to give in so readily and elected instead to be difficult. Holding down the fire raging in his chest, he asked, mild as ever, "For as long as you live?"

"For as long as I live."

"I might walk very fast, with no regard for you."

"That's all right, I'll chase after you."

"I might not want to walk anymore and just stand there."

"Then I'll stand with Shizun."

Agitated by his unfaltering answers, Chu Wanning flicked his sleeves and said, "Then what if I can't walk anymore?"

"I'll carry you."

Chu Wanning looked affronted. Mo Ran paused, realizing this might have been a little disrespectful—rude even. Eyes widening, he frantically waved his hand and amended, "I'll carry you on my back."

Chu Wanning's heart beat faster and faster, and it took every ounce of his self-control to resist the urge to help this man up, to touch him. He furrowed his brow at this impulse, looking anxious and a bit cross. "Who wants to be carried by you."

Mo Ran opened his mouth but didn't know what to say. His shizun was always difficult like this—neither wanting to be carried on his back nor in his arms. It wasn't like he could hoist him over his head, and he certainly couldn't drag him on the ground. He felt like he was too dumb to work out how to make Chu Wanning happy. At a loss, he hung his head like an abandoned stray dog. He muttered in a small voice, "Then I'll stop walking too."

Chu Wanning didn't know what to say.

"If you want to get rained on, then I'll keep you company in the rain too."

Chu Wanning was at his wit's end from this relentless onslaught. He was so used to doing everything himself that he blurted without thinking, "I don't want your company."

Mo Ran finally fell silent. From where he stood, Chu Wanning could only see his broad forehead, dark eyebrows, and those long lashes, now downcast and quivering, like curtains rising and falling in the wind.

"Shizun…" Mo Ran misunderstood the feelings behind Chu Wanning's agitated refusal. He asked, "Are you still mad at me…?"

Helplessly drowning in the pounding of his own heart, Chu Wanning didn't quite catch his question. "What?"

"Back in the underworld, I already apologized to Shizun many, many times, but I know it's not enough. I spent every moment of these past five years feeling guilty. I know I owe you."

Chu Wanning was rendered speechless.

"I want to do better—so that I won't feel too dirty to stand before you, so that I'll be able to lift my head in front of you at least. But I…I can't catch up to you. Every day when I wake up, I worry that I'm dreaming, that you'll be gone if I wake from the dream. I keep hearing the words you said at Jincheng Lake, that the most wonderful dreams are rarely ever true, and then I just… I just get so upset…"

Mo Ran's voice grew rough. He still had more to say, but he didn't want to say it. He felt he had no right to talk about these things in front of Chu Wanning, didn't have the heart to tell Chu Wanning all that had happened in these last five years.

Sometimes…all alone in Snow Valley, he couldn't tell what day it was, or even where he was. He'd prick himself with a needle then, again and again between the joints of his fingers. It hurt, but that was how he knew he was still conscious, still alive. That was how he knew he wasn't still in his previous life, dreaming. That when he woke up it wouldn't be to a Sisheng Peak stripped of all familiarity, a Xue Meng with eyes full of hate, and a Rufeng Sect that had been razed to the ground. That if he were to go to Red Lotus Pavilion, he wouldn't find Chu Wanning lying there, looking as if he were still alive.

As if he were still alive. *As if* he were still alive.

What words could hurt more than these?

It *was* strange, now that he thought about it—when he'd learned Chu Wanning had died to save him, and when he'd gone down to the underworld to seek his souls, Mo Ran's heart had ached. But it had been nothing like the kind of irrepressible despair he felt now. As time wore on, day after day, as it came closer and closer to the moment of Chu Wanning's awakening, the pain only worsened, as if a knife were cutting into his heart.

Perhaps it was because he'd had too much time to think in those days he spent alone. Perhaps it was because he had tried, in that time without Chu Wanning, so desperately—even hysterically—to imitate that person, to the point he wanted to tear himself entirely apart and reassemble the fragments into Chu Wanning's form.

Whatever the reason, many things that he had never really paid attention to or thought about, things that he had gradually forgotten, had all resurfaced in his mind. Those memories of the bygone past were like waterlogged shoals exposed in the wake of the retreating tide. He stood alone at the shore, but the waves were already gone.

He could see it so clearly now. A scene from his past life, surrounded by the beacons of war on all sides, at the end of the line. Xue Meng had come to Sisheng Peak, and in a Wushan Palace changed beyond recognition, Xue Meng had interrogated him with tears in his eyes. Demanded to know why had he done this to his own shizun. Xue Meng had tried to force him then, force him to turn back before death. He had said:

No, Mo Ran. Think about it. Let go of your vicious hatred and look back properly. He once trained you in cultivation and martial arts, trained you in the art of self-defense. He once taught you how to read and write, taught you poetry and painting. He once learned how to cook just for you, even though he was so clumsy and got cuts all over his hands.

He once… He once waited every day for you to come home, all alone by himself, from nightfall…till the break of dawn…

Back then, Mo Ran hadn't listened. He'd refused to look. Now he stood on the shores of fate, where the tide had receded, and when he looked down, there was a lost heart under his foot, a heart

that had once been so good to him, so genuine to him that it had nearly driven itself to death. But he had been so set in his ways that he had seen none of that as he'd trod upon it—as he had trod upon Chu Wanning's own heart.

A chill ran down Mo Ran's spine whenever he thought of it. What had he done… What had he *done*? Two lifetimes, sixteen years; had he ever repaid Chu Wanning's kindness? Had he ever, even just for one day, put Chu Wanning first in his heart?!

Damned beast! Had his heart then been made of stone? How else could it not have hurt?!

How many times in these past five years had he dreamt of Chu Wanning's return, in robes white as snow, looking just as he'd used to? When he woke, he'd find the pillow wet. And every single day he would say, *Chu Wanning, Shizun, I'm sorry, I was wrong, I was wrong*. And every day the recital lessened his guilt exactly none.

Later, when Mo Ran saw the blooming flowers of spring, he would think of him, and when he saw the falling snows of winter, he would think of him as well.

Later, every daybreak was golden like Chu Wanning's soul. Every nightfall was dark like Chu Wanning's eyes. Later, every beam of white moonlight was like the snow of his sleeves, every rising sun was like the warmth in his eyes. Later, he'd see Chu Wanning's silhouette in the vermilion clouds on the horizon, in the cerulean light of dawn, in the surging, billowing clouds overhead. He was everywhere.

Propelled by this anguish and yearning, he'd gradually felt his resentment over his low birth fade, gradually felt his near-fanatical adoration of Shi Mei begin to cool.

One day, outside Snow Valley, he had seen a snow-covered winter jasmine growing out of a crack in a wall. He had gazed at it quietly for a while, thinking, as he always did: *Ah, what a pretty flower. Shizun would definitely like it if he could see.*

It had been such a cursory thought about the simplest, most casual and unimportant little thing. But between one breath and the next, all the sorrows that hadn't managed to drive him out of his mind and force him to his knees back when Chu Wanning died suddenly rushed over him. The saying went that a thousand-mile-

long levee could be destroyed by the tunneling of ants; at that moment, Mo Ran broke down all at once. He bawled miserably, startling geese into flight from the depths of the valley. His cries were hoarse and ugly, a disgrace to the golden flower that was blooming against the snow.

It had been five years. Yet he had never once forgiven himself.

"Shizun…sorry… I really tried my best to make it back in time today; I even had a present for you so that I wouldn't come empty-handed…"

The assumed composure finally dissipated; the feigned ease finally collapsed. Kneeling before Chu Wanning, Mo Ran finally fell apart. In truth, it was only in front of Chu Wanning that the Mo Ran of today would let himself fall to pieces like this.

"I'm…still really stupid. I couldn't even manage the first thing I promised you after your revival. It's my fault."

Chu Wanning could hardly bear to look at him like this. He had always adored Mo Ran, and now that they had finally been reunited after such a long time, he didn't have the heart to see him so miserable. But when he heard Mo Ran's words, Chu Wanning hesitated before asking, "Why didn't you get back in time today?"

"There actually…was enough time to make it back. But I ran into some fiends making trouble at Butterfly Town, so I…"

"Got held up clearing them out?"

"Sorry." Mo Ran stared at the ground. "Not only did I get held up, even the present I prepared for Shizun was destroyed…and I also got blood all over me, so I rushed here to wash it off, only to…"

Chu Wanning could feel his heart going soft.

Mo-zongshi.

Mo Ran was indeed nothing like he had been five years ago. The Mo Ran of five years ago had been a selfish brat, but now he understood the weight of things. Chu Wanning didn't care all that much for trifles like festivities and gifts—in fact, if Mo Ran had seen the demon problem in Butterfly Town and chosen to ignore it, Chu Wanning would've been furious with him. But as he gazed at this man kneeling before him, all honesty and clumsiness as he

begged his forgiveness, Chu Wanning instead found him to be so dumb it was rather cute.

He took a slow step forward, a warm feeling suffusing his heart. He reached out and was just about to help Mo Ran up when he heard him mutter, “Shizun, please don’t kick me out of the sect.”

Now it was Chu Wanning’s turn to be taken aback. He didn’t know the depth of Mo Ran’s guilt and remorse, so he hadn’t expected Mo Ran to say any such thing. Hesitant, he began, “What…”

“Even if you don’t want me to stay with you or chase after you when it rains; even if you don’t want me to carry you—even if you don’t want any of that, even then, please don’t kick me out.”

Mo Ran finally lifted his head. Chu Wanning’s heart trembled. He saw the faint redness in the rims of his eyes, and the way they were a little wet. Chu Wanning was ordinarily firm and decisive, but now he found himself adrift. “You… You’re twenty-two already, why are you still…” He paused and huffed out a long sigh. “First, get up.”

Lifting an arm to rub forcefully at his eyes, Mo Ran said stubbornly, “I’m not getting up if Shizun doesn’t want me.”

Still a scoundrel all right!

Chu Wanning could feel a headache coming on. Lips pressed into a thin line, he grabbed Mo Ran by the wrist and hauled him up. But the moment the tips of his fingers made contact, all he could feel was the strength in his muscles and the heat of his skin. The firm body of this young man was nothing like that of his adolescent self. One touch made Chu Wanning’s heart pound right out of his chest, and he let go at once, caught off guard. Mo Ran was fortunately too distraught to notice Chu Wanning’s strange behavior. But Chu Wanning stared at his own hand in disbelief as bewilderment raged within him.

Just *what* was wrong with him? Had the five years of slumber undone every bit of his asceticism and reserve? He glanced up at Mo Ran in astonishment. Or was it because the person in front of him had really changed so much that it was hard for him to control himself?

Mo Ran worried his lip for a spell, then seemed to make up his

mind to be obstinate—so obstinate he couldn't even *be* kicked out. "Please don't make me leave, Shizun." He made to kneel back down.

How could Chu Wanning possibly risk helping him up a second time? He hastily stopped him with a stern, "Don't you kneel again! I'll really toss you out if you do!"

Mo Ran paused and blinked. He suddenly figured it out. Eyes lighting up, he said, "Shizun, you aren't blaming me… You're not mad 'cause I didn't make it back for the banquet? You…"

"Have I ever been that petty?" Chu Wanning snapped.

In his excitement, Mo Ran tried to go in for a hug. Chu Wanning was startled to say the least, taking a quick step back and chiding with a frown, "What do you think you're doing? Where's your propriety?"

"Ah." Realizing his mistake, Mo Ran rushed to apologize, "Sorry, sorry, I forgot myself for a minute."

Try as he might to remain cool, the tips of Chu Wanning's ears were bright red. "Already in your twenties and still don't know your manners."

The tips of Mo Ran's ears turned red as well. He mumbled, "It's my fault."

It's my fault was practically his catchphrase at this point. Hearing it again, Chu Wanning felt a little of a lot of things: mad, amused, pitying, warm. Lashes flicking up, he secretly stole another glance at Mo Ran from the corner of his eye. There stood a tall, handsome man with sun-kissed skin. Perhaps it was due to the lingering steam of the hot springs, or perhaps something else altogether, that his cheeks were a little flushed and warm. He practically seemed to glow with the vibrancy of youth, so much so that it dissipated the steam in the air and made that pair of dark, shining eyes seem all the brighter.

Chu Wanning felt his own heart thud against his ribcage, and the tips of his fingers felt as though they were on fire again, like they had earlier when he touched Mo Ran. His throat was suddenly awfully dry, and he didn't look at Mo Ran again as he muttered, "Idiot," and turned to leave.

But the barrier above him didn’t even wobble. Mo Ran really did chase after him, just as he promised.

Chu Wanning lowered his gaze and didn’t dare look back, too aware that he could no longer hide the love and desire in his eyes, in the same way it was impossible to mask the burning at his fingertips.

Mo Ran had finally ruined him. This man had done everything that the Mo Ran of five years ago couldn’t; he had taken his heart and drowned it in the ocean of desires.[7] Henceforth, Chu Wanning would be as a mere mortal, possessed of a body of flesh and a soul defenseless against desire, trapped in the web, unable to escape.

Chapter 131:
Shizun Does Some Light Reading

CHU WANNING LAY in his bed in the Red Lotus Pavilion that night, tossing and turning, unable to find sleep. He contemplated how Mo Ran had ended up growing into the man he was now. Mo-zongshi, Mo Weiyu; all he could see when he closed his eyes were that man's handsome features, and those bright, steady eyes that held determination and tenderness in equal measure.

Chu Wanning cursed under his breath and kicked the quilt off the bed, then proceeded to starfish on it while staring up at the roof beams in torment. He tried everything to wade out of the ocean of desires, to cut off the threads of desire. In the end, he was exhausted.

"Mo Weiyu, you bastard," he mumbled.

He turned his head away but couldn't escape the thoughts. It was almost as if that hot, firm body from Melodic Springs was still right in front of him—he could see the broad shoulders, the defined contours of his back, and the way the water slid slowly down along the vee of his abs when he'd turned…

Chu Wanning jolted from the bed, face ashen. He didn't dare finish that thought. He grabbed the first book his hand made contact with like it was a lifeline.

Poor, unfortunate Chu Wanning. To have led such a respectable life, only to be reduced now to using books to distract his inner demons. He didn't know which book he had grabbed out of the stack Xue Meng had bought, but the pages were covered in densely packed rows of tiny writing. Chu Wanning's eyes skated over the words without taking anything in at first, so it wasn't until some minutes later that he realized what it was that he was reading.

On that thin paper was written a very neat line of words:

SIZE RANKING OF THE CULTIVATION WORLD'S YOUNG HEROES

Chu Wanning knew the words individually, but they didn't make very much sense together. Young Heroes…Size…Ranking? What size? Height?

As he read further, he spied a note in small writing: *This observational ranking is not a comprehensive listing due to the fact that some young heroes never bathe outside or visit pleasure districts. The following individuals are missing from the ranking: Nangong Si and Xu Shuanglin of Rufeng Sect, Jiang Xi of Guyueye, Xue Meng, Xie Fengya, and Chu Wanning of Sisheng Peak…*

Chu Wanning blinked. What was that supposed to mean? Surely their heights were pretty obvious even without bathing publicly or going to pleasure districts? And there was even a passing mention of himself… He furrowed his brow and put a finger on the cramped lines to keep his place as he read on, only to choke at the very first name on the list.

Mo Weiyu

Gongzi of Sisheng Peak, Mo-zongshi

Chu Wanning thought briefly back to Mo Ran's figure. To be fair, he *had* gotten quite tall—but surely not so tall as to rank number one?

Reading on, it said: *Seen when bathing at the Hall of Abundant Virtues; an absolute unit, truly awe-inspiring.*

Chu Wanning blinked in confusion. Bathing at the Hall of Abundant Virtues… Absolute unit…?

Something felt vaguely off to Chu Wanning, but he really was much too pure of mind, and couldn't puzzle it out even after ruminating on it for quite a while. Thus, he could only keep reading.

The person ranked second was a wandering cultivator he'd never heard of. Written beside it was: *Seen when bathing in the forest; mighty.*

"What is this gibberish." Chu Wanning was a little put off. "Perhaps shoes and hairpieces could add to a person's height, but not so much that it would make a difference. Why go so far as to

spy on people bathing? Why would this kind of trashy book be popular…"

Then he saw the third name—

Mei Hanxue

Direct disciple of the Kunlun Taxue Palace Sect Leader

The text beside it was different this time; instead of "seen when bathing," it read: *Measured by one of Chunying Pavilion's girls and corroborated by a number of women from the cultivation world; Mei-gongzi's endowment could leave a lady so pliant that her body would be like water and her bones like mud, and could also readily service ten people a night.*

It was dead silent for a long moment.

The Yuheng Elder's head exploded into a droning buzz. Face red-hot and gaze flickering, he flung the booklet across the room with great vigor like it had burned him, incensed beyond belief.

What had he just read? What size?! Even if he was dense, he wasn't *that* dense. What other size could it be?! Filthy! Shameless! Indecent! *Disgraceful!*

Even after stiffly sitting in bed for a long while, Chu Wanning was still furious. He got up, picked up the booklet, and blasted it into a million tiny pieces with a pulse of spiritual energy from his fingertips. But like a glowing-hot branding iron, the words *absolute unit, truly awe-inspiring* had already been seared into his heart with a hiss, leaving his face flushed and his heart thundering.

Chu Wanning was a very proper, very upright person. Earlier, at Melodic Springs, he had very consciously kept his eyes up, never so much as glancing in the direction of any place he wasn't supposed to. Besides, all that steam made everything so hazy he wouldn't have seen anything anyway. But with a few words, this filthy tome had managed to paint the image before his eyes. Worse still, words often presented even more fertile ground to the vivid imaginings of the mind than pictures.

Absolute unit…

Chu Wanning dragged his hands down his face. After a long pause, he grabbed the quilt and pulled it over his head. It was only his first day out of seclusion, and he'd already had the misfortune of suffering *this*. The times sure had changed, Chu Wanning bitterly thought—he'd almost rather lie down and go back to being dead!

Nevertheless, the Yuheng Elder had always held himself to the highest standards. So though he barely got a wink of sleep that night, and regardless of how aghast and unsettled he felt inside, he still rose the next day on time, got himself washed and neatly dressed, and drifted gracefully down from the southern summit of Sisheng Peak with a countenance that was nothing short of dignified and restrained.

Today was the day of the sect's monthly assessment. The Platform of Sin and Virtue glinted with flashes of sun reflecting off light armor as thousands of disciples performed their martial arts drills under the appraising eyes of the elders on the platforms high above. Though he had been absent for five whole years, Chu Wanning's seat was still right where it used to be, on Xue Zhengyong's left. He ascended the bluestone steps wearing a weary expression and white robes that trailed on the ground, took his waiting seat with a sweep of those broad sleeves, and leisurely poured himself a cup of tea to sip while he watched.

Noting his sullen expression, Xue Zhengyong suspected Chu Wanning was mad about Mo Ran missing the banquet last night, so he leaned over and soothed him in a low voice. “Yuheng, Ran-er’s back.”

But contrary to expectation, this only earned him a scowl that twitched between Chu Wanning’s brows and an even more deeply sullen expression. “I know, I already saw him.”

“Ah? Already saw him?” After a pause, Xue Zhengyong nodded. “Great! So, what do you think? He’s changed quite a lot, eh?”

“Mn…”

Chu Wanning didn’t want to talk about Mo Ran, especially considering that he had been cursed with the words *absolute unit, truly awe-inspiring* echoing incessantly in his head since yesterday. Neither did he plan to look for Mo Ran in the sea of people below. Instead, he looked down at the table.

“That’s a lot of fruit and pastries.”

Xue Zhengyong grinned. “You haven’t had breakfast yet, have you? Go ahead and eat.”

Chu Wanning didn’t bother with polite refusals. He picked up a lotus crisp to eat with his tea. The crisp had a pleasing pink gradient from the darker base of the petals to the pale tips, with a filling of red bean paste and flaky layers that bore the refreshing sweetness of osmanthus flowers.

“These taste like they’re from Lin’an’s Breeze Bakery…” Chu Wanning murmured, then turned to Xue Zhengyong. “They weren’t made by Mengpo Hall?”

“Nope. Ran-er brought these back just for you.” Xue Zhengyong grinned. “See, the other elders didn’t get any.”

Only then did Chu Wanning belatedly realize that the wooden table before him was the only one laden with piles of fruits and snacks, from pastries to sugared desserts. There was even a small, jade-colored porcelain bowl that, when he lifted the lid, turned out to hold exactly three sweet tangyuan. Rather than the usual kind made with white glutinous rice, the skins of these round tangyuan were made with lotus root powder, a Lin’an specialty, so that they

were the translucent color of jade.

“Oh yeah, Ran-er borrowed the kitchen at Mengpo Hall this morning to make those. The red one has rose and red bean paste filling, the yellow one is peanut sesame, and the green one’s apparently got some fancy tea-based skin made with powdered Longjing tea. Interesting flavors, these; it’s too bad there aren’t more,” Xue Zhengyong mumbled. “They’re real fancy and all, but he was in there all morning and only made three.”

Chu Wanning eyed the tangyuan in silence.

“Yuheng, is that enough for you?”

A long pause. “Mn.” Chu Wanning nodded.

In fact, any time he ate tangyuan, he only ever ate three. The first was sweet, the second had a nice aftertaste, the third was enough, and a fourth would be too much. It was a lucky coincidence that Mo Ran had happened to make exactly three, no more and no less, just the way he liked it.

Chu Wanning took up the porcelain spoon and scooped up one of the adorably round lotus-powder tangyuan. He held it to his lips, marveling at how it was just the right size, perfect for eating in one bite—quite unlike the ones Mengpo Hall made for the Lantern Festival, which were so big that they stuck to his mouth and took some effort to chew. The person who had made these tangyuan seemed to know exactly how much his mouth could hold, the exact size the balls needed to be in order to fit comfortably in his mouth. Even the gooey filling seemed to be mixed with untold intimacy.

The thought made Chu Wanning’s heart flutter for some reason, in the brief moment before it was crushed by shame and swept under a semblance of cool composure. “He’s a pretty good cook.”

“Too bad he only made them for you. No one else gets any, not even his poor uncle.” Xue Zhengyong sighed ruefully.

Chu Wanning said nothing. He pressed his lips lightly together as he listened, stirring idly at the soup left in the bowl. The tangyuan were gone by now, the perfect measure of sweetness slowly spreading in his heart.

Once he’d finished the food, Chu Wanning paid no mind to the

spirited drills down below, opting instead to pick up a book from the table that chronicled the events at Sisheng Peak over the last five years. These records were all managed by Xue Zhengyong, so they were simple and straight to the point. Chu Wanning read it cover to cover in no time. As he started to close the book, he noticed another volume beneath.

"What's this…" He picked up the thread-bound book; it was shockingly thick.

Xue Zhengyong glanced over with a grin. "Another present from Ran-er. He was too embarrassed to give it to you personally 'cause he accidentally got blood on it while taking care of some fiends on his way home, and some pages got ripped too. He asked me to put it on your table this morning."

Chu Wanning nodded and flipped open the book, slender fingers trailing across the first page. On it was written in a neat, straight script:

Dear Shizun.

His eyes opened a little wider in surprise. Letters written to him? His heart suddenly felt like it had been singed by fire, hot and agonizing. He lifted his eyes to look for Mo Ran in the sea of people below but found only endless rows of glistening armor, like light reflected off the scales of leaping fish. The person he sought was nowhere in sight. Chu Wanning turned back to the letters.

Mo Ran had missed his shizun every single day of his seclusion. He had lots of things he wanted to say and worried that he wouldn't remember them all, so he'd had a sturdy book made, a thick one with one thousand eight hundred and twenty-five pages in total. On each day of those five years, he would write his shizun a letter about whatever he did or saw, big or small, from the particularly gross leaf-wrapped sticky rice cake he'd had the misfortune of tasting to the insights he'd gained from cultivation training that day. He wrote everything down.

He'd originally planned for the book to have exactly one thousand eight hundred and twenty-five pages, no more and no less, so that the day he wrote the last letter on the final page would be the day his shizun emerged from seclusion. But there were days when he couldn't stop writing, the words pouring out ardently in tiny handwriting squeezed onto the page, as if he wanted nothing

more than to show Chu Wanning the sea-buckthorn flowers of Outer Mongolia and the hazy fog surrounding Changbai Mountain; wanted nothing more than to tuck the delicious sweets tasted that day between the pages to share with Chu Wanning when he awoke.

The pages were lined with rows upon rows of minuscule characters. There was written nothing too sentimental, nor did he include aught sad or upsetting, only committing the happy, brilliant moments to words, setting down only the good to share with Chu Wanning. Still, the book had run out of pages, and he'd had to attach a thick stack of letters to the back…

Chu Wanning flipped slowly through the book, his eyes stinging a little. He watched Mo Ran's handwriting transform, from childish to neat to elegant. The ink on the most recent letter had not yet dried, while that on the earliest page had already yellowed.

In every letter, the words "Dear Shizun" appeared a little different. Slowly, gradually, they went from light and brisk to sure and steadfast. Until, toward the end, they flowed like a painting yet could cut through metal, each confident stroke an art unto itself.

Flipping to the last page, Chu Wanning touched the words on the first page again.

Dear Shizun, Dear Shizun.

As he looked at that neat handwriting, he could almost see the tip of Mo Ran's writing brush lift from the paper, could see him set it down and raise his head, no longer the young man of the past. From the first letter to the last, he could almost see Mo Ran growing up, from sixteen to twenty-two, his figure becoming taller, his features more defined. And, every day without fail, this young man would sit down at the table and write a letter addressed to him.

"Shizun!"

The drills had ended without him realizing. Someone was calling to him. Chu Wanning looked up to see Xue Meng waving excitedly from the very front of the Platform of Sin and Virtue. Next to Xue Meng, a tall man with broad shoulders, a narrow waist, and a pair of long legs stood quietly, his face flushed from the drills and a sheen of sweat over his forehead, sleek as a panther's coat under the sun.

Noticing Chu Wanning's eyes on him, Mo Ran paused and

broke into a smile. In the golden light of morning, his smile was bright and mesmerizing, like the gentle swaying of a sun-bathed cypress. His eyes were filled with warmth, his lashes were dipped in gentleness, and that strong, spirited mien was a little bashful, yet so vibrant and fiery as to steal one's breath.

How very handsome he was.

Chu Wanning maintained a carefully neutral expression as he crossed his arms where he was sitting on the high platform and peered loftily down. To any observer, he appeared cool and collected as ever. Little did they know that his thoughts were actually in utter chaos, his insides tied into a million knots of flustered panic.

Grinning within the milling crowd, Mo Ran raised a hand and pointed at his own clothes, then at Chu Wanning. Chu Wanning narrowed his phoenix eyes and looked back at him in confusion.

Mo Ran smiled even wider. He cupped his hands around his lips and silently mouthed something to him.

Chu Wanning was even more confused. The morning breeze danced through gently rustling leaves. Mo Ran stifled an exasperated smile and shook his head, then tapped the front of his own robes with a finger.

Chu Wanning looked downward. A beat later, his ears turned red. Under the guidance of his disciple, the esteemed and dignified Yuheng Elder finally realized that, in his hurry to get ready this morning, as he'd reached into the mess of clothing heaped together in the Red Lotus Pavilion, he had unwittingly put on the robes he had "borrowed" from Mo Ran last night.

No wonder it had felt like there was something dragging on the ground behind him as he walked today! It was the hem of the robe!

Mo Weiyu, the cheek of you. Chu Wanning turned away in a huff. *You tactless bastard; why do you only ever say exactly what you shouldn't!*

Chapter 132:
Shizun and Shi Mei

In the evening, as the birds returned to roost, so too did the disciples of Sisheng Peak make haste to Mengpo Hall after finishing their tasks for the day. Only Mo Ran still stood by the practice dummies as if waiting for someone.

His relationship with Xue Meng had much improved in recent years. There was less animosity between them now, especially after Mo Ran had given his cousin that top-grade spiritual stone to be inset into his Longcheng blade. Thus Xue Meng turned back to look for him. "Aren't you coming to dinner?"

"Not yet."

Standing in the dusky light of the setting sun, Shi Mei was devastatingly beautiful, the afterglow turning his fair skin fairer still. Brushing back a strand of loose hair, he asked, "Is A-Ran waiting for Shizun?"

"Mhm."

Mo Ran had seen Shi Mei at morning practice earlier in the day. Back when he had worked with Xue Meng to repair the Heavenly Rift, Mo Ran had noticed that Shi Mei was about to outstrip Xue Meng in height. Yet in this moment, with the sun setting in the west, the sight of him standing so tall in front of Xue Meng still felt strange to Mo Ran.

Of course he didn't think Shi Mei was bad-looking, it was just that…he had a peculiar feeling he couldn't really put his finger on. Mo Ran didn't know what it was, exactly; maybe he was too used to the way Shi Mei's delicate figure had been hidden behind Xue Meng's, so he'd never expected this kind of reversal.

Mo Ran smiled at Shi Mei. "Since I missed the banquet yesterday, I wanted to invite Shizun down the mountain for a meal as an apology. So I won't be going to Mengpo Hall today. You guys are welcome to come if you want."

Xue Meng and Shi Mei weren't used to sharing meals with Chu

Wanning, so they looked at each other and left. Mo Ran had nothing else to do, so he crouched on a large rock and pulled a blade of foxtail grass to play with while he waited.

The setting sun was a deep crimson, and the crescent moon was beginning to peek from behind the purpling clouds when the shape of a person at last appeared on the bamboo footpath from the southern peak, treading slowly. That figure had changed into a set of light robes in white and carried a cloth bundle in hand. He paused for a beat upon seeing Mo Ran, and unease flashed briefly across his features.

"I was just about to go looking for you… What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for Shizun so we can have dinner together." Mo Ran hopped off the rock, still holding the foxtail grass and beaming brightly. "There's a new restaurant in Wuchang Town, and I heard they have a famous chef from the upper cultivation realm who makes really good pastries. So I wanted to invite Shizun to try the place with me."

Chu Wanning looked him up and down mildly. "Not bad. You've got money to throw around now, I see."

Mo Ran grinned and said nothing.

With a huff, Chu Wanning tossed the cloth bundle at him. Mo Ran caught it. "What's this?"

"Your clothes," Chu Wanning replied as he strode past.

Mo Ran hurried after him with a smile. "This robe's made of a pretty good fabric, light but warm. If Shizun likes it, I can have it altered to be smaller and…"

"I don't wear hand-me-downs."

Mo Ran faltered as embarrassment hit. "That's not what I meant. I just… I saw Shizun wearing it this morning, so I thought you liked it… That was thoughtless of me. I'll send someone to the tailor to have a new robe made."

"Do you even know what size I wear?" Chu Wanning asked.

Mo Ran thought: how could he possibly not know Chu Wanning's size? He could approximate the size of Chu Wanning's waist just by circling his arms, and he knew if Chu

Wanning stood on tiptoes, his chin would be level with his own shoulders. In the past, Chu Wanning would sometimes bite him in the throes of passion despite himself, leaving twin crescents of teeth marks beside his collarbone that wouldn't fade for days. Of course he knew the length of Chu Wanning's legs as well—legs that were so powerful when they wrestled, but so helpless when wrapped around his waist, slim calf muscles quivering, smoothly rounded toes tightly curled… And how could he possibly not know the exact breadth of Chu Wanning's shoulders, or the full, plump curvature of his buttocks?

Chu Wanning, for his part, was pure as the driven snow and had no idea what he'd just asked, imagining he had stumped his good disciple Mo Weiyu with this brilliant query of his. He said with a sweep of his sleeves, "How would you even order anything without knowing my size?"

Mo Ran knew better than to respond. After all, it wasn't as if he could claim that he *did* know, that his mind had kept drifting while he was making tangyuan earlier, fixated on the way Chu Wanning's figure had looked the night before: strong and toned and well-proportioned even in the steamy haze of Melodic Springs, looking just as incredible as he remembered. Or that his mind had subsequently wandered to thoughts of Chu Wanning's thin, pale lips, the way they'd looked stretched painfully around his own girth in the past as he'd been forced to swallow him, and the spasming of his throat as he'd gagged.

At that moment, Mo Ran had closed his eyes, the jut of his throat bobbing as he'd mentally condemned himself a beast. *Respect him, cherish him, no more improper thoughts toward him.*

Respect him… Respect him…

Two deep breaths later, he'd managed to suppress his burning arousal, but the tangyuan had ended up a bit too big. His shizun would probably find them difficult to eat, so he'd tossed them out and remade them, three dainty little ones this time. Mo Ran contemplatively held them between his fingers a while, thought about Chu Wanning's thin lips parting slightly to take the sweet, sticky tangyuan into the soft warmth of his mouth… The curl of that tongue like a searing flame, igniting all of Mo Ran's passions and desires, just about taking his life.

So he knew even the exact size a sweet should be in order to fit into Chu Wanning's mouth, yet here Chu Wanning was asking if he knew what size clothing he wore. The question lapped kittenishly at the inside of his chest. Not daring to think on it further, Mo Ran lowered his head and said, "Of course I'd ask Shizun for his size beforehand."

Chu Wanning found his words a little odd. He shot him a glance. "Did you catch a cold?"

"Nope."

"Then why is your voice so hoarse?"

"…Inflammation."

After a moment of blank staring, something seemed to occur to Chu Wanning. He turned his face away, lips pressed into a thin line and gloom gathering between his brows, but the back of his ears were flushed pink.

The faint blush persisted until they got to Wuchang Town, only fading when they were seated in a room with a view inside the newly opened Zhongqiu Restaurant. This was the first time Mo Ran had earnestly invited Chu Wanning out for a meal. When he'd done so before, it had always been out of either necessity or exasperation, and thus his frame of mind had been completely different.

The waiter steeped a pot of Lushan Mist and brought over some melon seeds and nuts, then respectfully produced two menus written on bamboo scrolls for this pair of cultivators from Sisheng Peak. Mo Ran flashed the waiter a smile as he took the scroll. "Thanks."

Chu Wanning subtly glanced up at Mo Ran. This person never used to have a habit of saying thanks before.

"Shizun should order whatever he likes, but I recommend their sweet and sour mandarin fish with pine nuts. I heard it's tasty and well-presented."

Chu Wanning nodded. "Then we'll get that. You pick the rest."

Mo Ran grinned. "I'll order according to Shizun's tastes then."

"You know what kind of food I like?" Chu Wanning asked mildly.

“Mhm, I do,” Mo Ran said after a pause. He’d always known, he’d just never bothered to remember before. But from now on, he intended to never forget.

He was still scanning the bamboo scroll when the sound of footfalls came from the stairs, along with the gentle clicking of the bead curtain. He heard the waiter’s voice saying, “Ah, right this way sir, the gentlemen you’re looking for are in this room…yes, yes, yes, they haven’t ordered wine yet.”

The curtain of blue silk and agate beads was gently lifted by a smooth, fair-skinned hand. At the doorway appeared an extraordinarily beautiful man with soft, ink-black hair and a smile in his eyes that could chase the clouds from the sky, carrying a pot of wine. Mo Ran turned and was visibly startled. “Shi Mei? What are you doing here?”

“I ran into the sect leader at Mengpo Hall. He heard that the two of you were eating here and was concerned this restaurant wouldn’t have aged wine since they’ve just opened. He sent me to deliver a pot of pear blossom white to go with your meal.” Shi Mei swung the wine pot dangling from his hand as he spoke; the adorably stocky pot was formed of red clay and held in twined bamboo rattan, and the wine could be heard swishing inside, its sweet fragrance faintly discernable even through the seal.

Shi Mei said with a smile, “Good thing I made it in time; it would’ve been a wasted trip if you’d already ordered wine.”

“What about you? Have you eaten yet?” Chu Wanning asked.

“I’ll eat when I get back. Mengpo Hall will be open for a while yet; I have time.”

Chu Wanning, being a courteous person, said: “You’re already here, so why not stay. Have a seat and eat with us.”

“Uh… I shouldn’t put A-Ran to the expense.”

Mo Ran smiled. “What expense, it’s just a matter of adding a chair.” He signaled for the waiter to bring out another set of bowls and chopsticks as he spoke. Zhongqiu Restaurant really was a fancy place—even the chopsticks used in the private rooms had threads of gold and silver inlaid into the tips, which glittered in the candlelight.

Shi Mei took a seat and poured wine into luminous, phosphorescent jade cups for each of them. The rich aroma of the pear blossom white immediately permeated the air. It was a familiar scent; in his past life, Mo Ran had drunk it when Shi Mei died, and yet again, all night on the rooftop, after Chu Wanning died.

But now they were both alive, and the calamity had passed. Mo Ran suddenly felt like none of those things from the past, be it the possession or the affection, really mattered anymore. What mattered was that the two best people in his life were still here, and he could treat them to good food and good wine with the money he'd earned. This was enough. These cups shared today were worth more than all the lands he'd ruled in the past.

"Excuse me, waiter. Can we get an order each of mandarin fish with pine nuts, stewed crab meatballs, savory pork trotter jelly, cherry ham, three-delicacies soup, and steamed pork in bamboo leaf, all mild. And then poached fish in hot chili oil, mapo tofu, beef tripe in chili sauce, and kung pao chicken, as spicy as you make them. For dim sum, we'll have shrimp dumplings, steamed spareribs and taro with soy sauce, golden tripe with scallop, and chicken feet in soy sauce. As for dessert…" Mo Ran glanced at Chu Wanning and closed the menu. "We'll have one of each."

Without even looking up, Chu Wanning said, "We can't finish all that."

Mo Ran insisted, "We'll just pack up the leftovers to go."

"It'll get cold."

"…We can have Mengpo Hall heat it up."

Chu Wanning didn't feel like wasting any more breath on him —Mo Ran was acting like a merchant who struck gold and got rich overnight, spending way too extravagantly. He opened his own menu, looked it over, and said, "Just one order of sweet kidney bean rolls, one order of leaf-wrapped sticky rice cake, and three bowls of tangyuan with red bean paste filling, thank you."

The dishes arrived promptly, one after another. Shi Mei liked spicy food, while Chu Wanning couldn't take even a hint of it, so Mo Ran arranged the dishes separately: half the table was light and refreshing, the other half bright red and sumptuous, the colors

complementing one another in a surprisingly appealing manner.

"Here comes the last one, our signature dish, mandarin fish with pine nuts—"

At the waiter's announcement, a plate of vibrantly colored and fragrant mandarin fish in a thick stew was presented by a pair of attendants. The fish must have weighed at least five catties, fried to a golden crisp and plated on an enormous, sky-blue porcelain dish. The flesh was cut into petals of even thickness, with a thick, richly red sweet-and-sour sauce ladled over, and topped with a sprinkling of emerald peas, slivers of Yunnan ham, and small, translucent shrimp. Just the sight of the dish made one's eyes sparkle and mouth water.

Chu Wanning liked sweet things, especially sweet-and-sour things. Although his expression remained neutral as ever when the fish was brought out, even he couldn't keep the twinkle from his eye. Mo Ran didn't miss it.

The waiter glanced at the table, spotting free space in front of Shi Mei, and started to rearrange the plates to make room for the fish. But a pair of faster hands than his beat him to it. Mo Ran stood and moved a couple of the meat dishes that Chu Wanning wasn't really eating to his own side of the table, then pushed a few of the delicious spicy dishes over to Shi Mei, leaving an empty space in front of Chu Wanning. Mo Ran grinned at the waiter and said, "Right there is fine."

"All right then!"

The waiter was all smiles, delighted to have a customer so accommodating, and immediately took the plate from the attendants to set down on the stretch of open table before leaving with a bow.

The rearrangement had been handled so naturally that anyone watching would only think Mo Ran was helping the waiter out, but Shi Mei had noticed the hidden bias. The gesture took him by surprise, and a strange expression flickered in Shi Mei's eyes in the long moment before he lowered them, now a little upset. He felt that Mo Ran, having returned after being away for five years, had changed. Not only did he look completely different, but the special attention he once showered on Shi Mei seemed to have faded a great deal. He liked mandarin fish with pine nuts too, so why did

Mo Ran put it so far from him? Did he not know? Or…

Or did he no longer feel the way he used to.

Shi Mei knew well his own worth. His looks and his temper were both better than Chu Wanning's; in fact, very few people in the entire cultivation world could match him in terms of beauty.

But right now, he suddenly felt rather uncertain. He knew that, despite Mo Ran's fickle and flirtatious behavior in his youth, acting as if he cared only for looks, it was all a ruse. In truth, the most precious thing to Mo Ran was genuine sentiment. If someone were to give him a tael of copper, he would repay them with a thousand gold. Now that the bitterness of past misunderstandings between him and his shizun had been dispelled, Chu Wanning's kindness to Mo Ran was not something Shi Mei could compete against. The thought brought a sudden chill to his heart, and he snapped his head up to look at the faces of the other two in the candlelight.

One drank wine with his head bowed and his expression mild, phoenix eyes lucent as water, lashes soft as mist. The other smiled as he watched the former, cheek propped in a hand and eyes glimmering. In those eyes, the candlelight reflected the snow of early spring layered upon an open balcony, pear blossoms blooming under clear moonlight. The fluttering of lashes resembled ripples spreading across the mirrored surface of a lake, sweeping across glittering stars with untold feelings likely unknown even to the bearer of those eyes.

In his moment of distraction, Shi Mei accidentally bumped his chopsticks with his elbow, sending them clattering to the floor and snapping himself out of his daze. He bent down to pick them up with a muttered apology.

But he paused when he leaned over. The chopsticks had landed right next to Mo Ran's boots, faintly glittering as they lay there, quiet, waiting to be retrieved. He could've asked the waiter for another pair, but Shi Mei never liked bothering others. Or perhaps, faced with such a demotion in status, even the most mild and even-tempered person would feel a little wronged, a little at a loss. Or maybe it was nothing so complicated—after all, a person's actions really were often just a matter of a passing thought.

In that moment, the opportunity presented itself. And Shi Mei

really did want to gauge how much Mo Ran cared for him now. So, after a few seconds of hesitation, he made up his mind. He ducked his head, extending his fair, slender hand to pick up the chopsticks by Mo Ran's feet.

The chopsticks really had fallen too close. It was completely natural and unavoidable that the back of Shi Mei's hand would brush against Mo Ran's lower leg as he retrieved them.

Chapter 133:
Shizun Has the Purest Mind

MO RAN WAS TAKING a sip of the pear blossom white when he felt something brush against his leg. He reflexively tried to inch his leg away, but before he could, the contact became unmistakable, pressing against him as it grazed past. Caught off guard, he hadn't fully processed what happened until Shi Mei straightened and he saw, on that beautiful face, the light pink flush, and the way he had his lips pressed into a thin line and his brows knit as if something was on his mind. Only then did Mo Ran realize—

A moment ago, was that…?

Mo Ran choked and burst into a violent coughing fit. In his mind, Shi Mei had always been as the untrodden snow in the spring, the new moon atop the branch—to be appreciatively gazed upon from a distance and not to be frivolously touched in any way. He loved Shi Mei to death and would happily die for him, but he'd rarely had any dirty thoughts where he was concerned, much less put such thoughts into action.

Had this pure, untainted person just…felt him up?

The thought shocked Mo Ran to the core, and he shook like a rattle drum, horrified. Chu Wanning frowned. "What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing!"

And right in front of Shizun too! …Surely not?! Th-that didn't seem like something Shi Mei would do… Mo Ran's expression grew yet more confounded, but it wasn't in awed surprise: more like awful surprise.

After several seconds spent calming his nerves, he heard Shi Mei call out lightly, "Waiter, excuse me! These chopsticks are dirty; can I trouble you for a new pair?"

The waiter came when called and left to fetch a replacement. Mo Ran nervously turned his head, only to come face-to-face with Shi Mei's mild features and the same calm gaze as always, as if he

had wholly imagined the bashful blush earlier. Sensing Mo Ran's attention, Shi Mei lifted his own peach-blossom eyes to return Mo Ran's glance with a subtle smile. "What is it?"

"Nothing, nothing."

"The chopsticks landed in an inconvenient spot," Shi Mei said. "Right by your foot."

"Oh…" Mo Ran heaved a sigh of relief and felt his heart settle back into place. He was overthinking things, of course. He thought to make some idle chat with Shi Mei to disperse the tension, but Shi Mei had already turned away and stood to ladle the soup.

Still feeling guilty about his misgivings a moment ago, Mo Ran said, "Here, let me help."

"That's all right, I've got it." Shi Mei pulled back his sleeve as he spoke and calmly ladled out the three-delicacies soup for himself. Mo Ran had placed the soup where it was, close to Chu Wanning and far from Shi Mei. It seemed reasonable while they were all seated, but now that Shi Mei was standing to reach it, it became immediately clear how far the dish was from him. He had to stretch his arm across the entire width of the table.

One ladleful, two ladlefuls, slow and measured.

Mo Ran watched in silence. Shi Mei said nothing when he met Mo Ran's uneasy gaze, only smiling slightly as he continued ladling. Feeling a bit awkward, Mo Ran waited for Shi Mei to finish, then asked Chu Wanning if he wanted the soup. Chu Wanning declined, so he pushed it to the middle of the table, neither too close nor too far from anyone.

Here were his esteemed teacher and his favorite person—there shouldn't have been any preference in the first place.

Partway through the meal, Shi Mei suddenly said, "A-Ran, you've really grown so much. You're no longer that disciple who used to make Shizun angry all the time. So since we're all here today, there's something I want to tell you, and an apology I want to make to Shizun."

Seeing how serious Shi Mei looked, Mo Ran gave him his full attention. "What is it?"

"Do you remember the first time I brought you wontons?"

Shi Mei said. “That bowl of wontons wasn’t made by me; I never was any good at making those, it was…”

Mo Ran smiled. “Oh, that? And here I was worried it was something serious. I figured that out a long time ago.”

“Ah, did you…?” Shi Mei’s pretty eyes opened wide in surprise. He turned to look at Chu Wanning, who was minding his own business, drinking his wine. “Did Shizun tell you?”

“Nope, saw it for myself right before going to the underworld.”

Mo Ran was about to elaborate when Chu Wanning set down his cup, cleared his throat, and shot him a cool, stern glance. Mo Ran knew how thin-skinned he was; he didn’t want others to know about his soft underbelly. So he said, “Anyway, I found out about the whole thing five years ago. It’s kind of a long story, so I won’t get into it.”

Shi Mei nodded. “That’s just as well.” He turned to Chu Wanning. “Shizun, back then, when you didn’t want to take the wontons to A-Ran yourself and had me do it instead, I didn’t think much of it. But as I watched the misunderstanding between you two deepen over time, I felt terrible. I wanted to find an opportunity to clear it up with A-Ran, but every time I tried, I couldn’t find the words… To be honest, I was being selfish. Aside from the young master, A-Ran is my only close friend at Sisheng Peak. I was afraid that he’d be unhappy if he found out, so…”

“It’s fine, I did say not to tell him. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Still, I feel really bad about it. It’s like I took credit for Shizun’s kindness. Shizun, I’m sorry.” Shi Mei dropped his gaze to the table. A moment later, he added, “A-Ran, I’m sorry to you as well.”

Mo Ran had never blamed Shi Mei for this. Even if his initial fondness for him had blossomed due to that mix-up, Shi Mei had been genuinely good to him in all the time afterward. Not to mention that Shi Mei had only been doing as Chu Wanning asked; it wasn’t as if he was intentionally trying to steal credit. He said hastily, “No, no, don’t worry about it. It’s all in the past anyway.”

Mo Ran stared at Shi Mei under the candlelight. He’d never

seen this face in his past life. Shi Mei had died early, his life cut short, wilted before it could bloom, becoming the great sorrow of his lifetime. He hadn't been given the chance to discover that—ah, so this is what Shi Mei would've looked like if he'd lived to be twenty-four. Tall and slender, with a face as fair as jade and a pair of warm peach-blossom eyes that were clear and glistening. He appeared so gentle that even his anger would probably be soft and mellow.

Mo Ran's tightly clenched heart relaxed by degrees, and he secretly sighed in relief. He suddenly felt very giddy, his heart warm and settled. Compared to Shi Mei at nineteen, this twenty-four-year-old felt a little like a stranger; they were no longer so intimate as they used to be. Maybe this unfamiliarity was the reason a thought as ridiculous as Shi Mei feeling up his leg even crossed his mind. But Mo Ran was sure that he'd get used to it in time. And as for the matter of romantic sentiment, he didn't want to force it—whatever happened would happen.

For five years he had wandered, barely leaving a trail, yet he'd still had a couple of close calls. Whether or not the fake Gouchen had a hand in any of those incidents, he didn't know. But it was a fact that the person behind the events at Butterfly Town and elsewhere had neither revealed themselves nor been caught. Mo Ran was sure there would be trouble down the line, and he knew better than to let his guard down. He was going to keep the two people beside him safe and sound, even at the cost of life.

Thus, Mo Ran set his heart at ease for the moment. Little did he know that this inner demon never did rest, but turned to harass another as soon as it had released its grasp on him.

Perhaps because of how much he'd eaten at dinner, Chu Wanning grew sleepy soon after he returned to Sisheng Peak. He had originally planned to work through the night finishing the blueprint for a new mechanism he was designing, but he'd only made it halfway through before the yawns hit. Try as he might, eventually he could go on no longer and fell into bed, blinking sleepily. He passed out without even changing his clothes.

His sleep was murky, filled with absurd dreams. First about that "Size Ranking of the Cultivation World's Young Heroes," then about that firm, toned body he'd seen in Melodic Springs. In the

dim light of the candle, Chu Wanning's brows twitched into a frown, as if trying to free himself from this shameless dream, only to inadvertently sink deeper in…

And then he had *that* dream again, the one from before.

A Sisheng Peak that looked nothing like the one he knew, a Loyalty Hall that was and yet wasn't. An adult Mo Weiyu grasping him by the jaw, looking at him with venomous, mocking eyes as he said those obscene things:

"Let me fuck you and I'll agree to your terms."

This Mo Weiyu was different from the Mo Ran he knew—his expression was too crazed, his handsome face too pale; his skin wasn't tanned the color of wheat.

"Get down on your knees…and suck me off…"

The disjointed words came in fragments from the depths of the nightmare. It felt like something in his head was about to break apart, inches away from breaking free of its chain and charging toward him. A chill ran down his spine. Yet, for some reason, he also felt inexplicably flustered.

In his dream, he watched as Mo Ran closed in on him and tore at his clothes, the sharp sound of the fabric ripping clearer than ever. Then it all went black, as if he were sinking into a quagmire.

The dream cut off there, the way it had countless times before. Always before, he had managed to return to sound slumber after the dream, with no further disturbances. Yet for some reason, today, his vision gradually grew light again after that point. Chu Wanning looked around, but the new dream was so hazy, it was like trying to peer through a layer of mist. He couldn't clearly see his surroundings, only that it was scarlet everywhere. In contrast, his sense of smell and touch gradually grew sharper, becoming even more acute than usual.

He was suddenly assailed by an indescribably heated arousal, and he saw a rugged body moving above him, pressing down against him and rocking. Startled, Chu Wanning instinctively tried to struggle free, but it was as if his body didn't belong to him at all, but to the him of this dream. He could feel himself trembling, and he could hear the man's rough breathing, the hot puffs of air against his ear, lips that brushed his earlobe over and over, yet neither

kissed it nor took it in to suck.

Chu Wanning turned his head. He was lying on a large, soft bed that creaked and swayed with their movements, and he could smell the musk of the beast pelt spread across the sheets. In the vague fuzziness of the dream, he tried to grasp the bedcover with a questing hand but didn't have the strength to move. The man atop him was vicious, holding nothing back, as though he intended to tear him apart. He heard a moan ripped from his own throat, hoarse and strangled. He shook his head desperately, trying to writhe away, but that man was too strong, so strong Chu Wanning felt as if the man could crush him in his hand. He felt numbness spread across his scalp as his entire body shook uncontrollably…

Perhaps the dream had been too realistic and too draining. Chu Wanning slept until the sun was high the next day, then spent a long while lying in bed staring into nothingness. When he turned his head, he seemed to still smell the scent of the beast pelt from that dream, musky and sweet.

Then he blinked, and he was back in his black sandalwood bed in the Red Lotus Pavilion, and everything was perfectly fine, with nothing out of the ordinary.

Except…

Chu Wanning froze, then slowly looked down in mute disbelief.

The Yuheng Elder, who had spent many years practicing asceticism on account of his cultivation method, and who rarely ever experienced physical arousal, discovered that he actually… shamefully…had morning wood…

Had his years of ascetic training been eaten by a dog?! And those dreams last night—what the hell *was* that? Why did he dream of such absurd things! How…how did it even happen? Surely not just from seeing Mo Ran's body that one time at Melodic Springs, then accidentally reading that trashy book with that "truly awe-inspiring" garbage?

Chu Wanning's expression darkened. He buried his face in his hands and rubbed vigorously, but his expression hadn't lightened any when he looked back up.

What was *wrong* with him?

Chu Wanning pressed his lips together and decided to take a soak in the cold lotus pond to cool himself off. But before his toes had touched the ground, he felt a ripple in the barrier of the Red Lotus Pavilion.

He had a visitor.

He immediately paled and yanked the quilt up to cover his lower half. The caller approached quickly, probably using qinggong. Soon he heard two knocks at the door.

"Shizun, are you up yet?"

The voice sounded just like the one in his dream—except that the one in his dream had been deeper and throatier, steeped in a fervent, bottomless lust. The voice outside the door now was gentle and respectful, even a little worried, probably because of how uncharacteristically late Chu Wanning had slept.

The sound of that voice smashed through the wall between dream and reality. Chu Wanning leaned against the bed, clutching the quilt to himself. The voice at the door brought back the way they were entwined in the dream, and their surging motions, rousing his passions into a turbulent tide and making it even harder for him to calm himself.

He had just resolved to lie back down and pretend to be asleep when he heard Mo Ran say through the door, "Shizun, are you in there? I'm coming in if you don't mind."

I'm coming in…

It was such a simple, normal phrase, but it made Chu Wanning think of the way that man had laid atop him in the dream, lips parting and closing. The way that virile body had felt so hot, Chu Wanning was sure he would be burned.

That person had said between gasps, *Relax, I'm coming in.*

Chu Wanning's face was red-hot; he sat dazed in bed with his clothes a disheveled mess and a fire burning him up from the inside. Fierce denial lived in his eyes, but it was like gravel on the shoals, with sharp points that would ward ships off in the bitter cold of winter. But when the snow melted in the spring and the water rose, washing over the jagged edges in a flowing, glimmering stream, it no longer seemed half so threatening. He'd rarely ever

been so mortified and helpless, nor had he ever felt such intense desire.

Chu Wanning stared ahead in a stupor, only snapping to his senses when Mo Ran pushed the door open to come inside. By then, it was already far too late to feign sleep.

Thus the sight that greeted Mo Ran when he walked in was that of Chu Wanning sitting up in bed, inky-black hair draped loosely around him in a sharp contrast to his face, luminous as the radiant surface of a frozen lake in the sun. His eyes and brows appeared even more stern than usual, and when he lifted his eyes, the look he directed at Mo Ran was like the light glancing off the frosty edge of a barely drawn blade.

But, too, there was a touch of red at the corners, so that the light was tinged with allure. Its ferocity was woven through with chagrin, as if he'd just suffered at someone's hands and had endured unspeakable deeds. His eyes were filled with indignation and a glassy hint of wetness.

Mo Ran's breathing slowed as he stared wordlessly at Chu Wanning, this man who was like a tender bud growing out of a thorny thicket. He felt as if a heavy rock had been dropped into his chest, sending waves splashing high…

Chapter 134:
Shizun Sure Can Eat

MO RAN SAID NOTHING for a long interval; the jut of his throat merely bobbed as he swallowed. He was drowning in torrential desire, clinging desperately to a piece of driftwood to keep himself afloat as he thought in a stutter:

R-respect and cherish him.

Respect as in respect and cherish, cherish as in respect and cherish. Do not defile, do not harm, do not have any unnecessary feelings, and *definitely* do not commit those outrageous acts he had committed in the past life to humiliate his shizun.

As the inside of his chest burned like hot lava, Mo Ran silently repeated that litany four or five times before he finally had wits enough to step into the room with feigned composure and greet Chu Wanning with a smile. “Shizun, so you were here after all… Why didn’t you say something?”

“Just woke up,” Chu Wanning replied dryly.

The dryness was no joke: his throat was dry, and so too was his desire. So dry that a single stray spark might set off an uncontrollable blaze.

Mo Ran was holding a heavy, five-layered bamboo food box. He thought about putting it on the table, but it was covered in a mess of files, drills, joinery, nails, and all manner of blueprints. There was no other option but to carry the box to Chu Wanning’s bed.

Chu Wanning’s morning grumpiness seemed even worse today than usual; he was visibly agitated as he glanced at Mo Ran and snapped, “What do you want?”

“Shizun woke up pretty late. There’s not much food left at Mengpo Hall now. I had nothing else to do, so I made breakfast to share with Shizun.”

He opened the box as he spoke and began to unpack it. The topmost level held a plate of sauteed mushrooms, the next a plate of

tender, stir-fried celtuce with water chestnuts, then silk-thread rolls and honey-glazed sweet lotus root, and on the very bottom were two bowls of rice, each grain plump and translucent, as well as a bowl of bamboo shoot and ham soup.

Two bowls of rice… Chu Wanning was a little speechless—did Mo Ran really think he was *that* much of a glutton?

"The table is a little messy…does Shizun want to eat in bed, or should I tidy the table and move the food over?"

Of course Chu Wanning didn't like eating in bed, but the quilt was the only thing hiding his yet-to-subside arousal from view. He wavered between decorum and dignity, then firmly chose the latter. "There are too many things on the table, it'll take too long to tidy up. I'll eat here."

Mo Ran nodded with a smile. "Okay."

It must be said that Mo Ran was quite a skilled cook. He'd been good five years ago; now, he was easily better than most ordinary chefs. What's more, Mo Ran also somehow knew Chu Wanning's tastes incredibly well. He knew that Chu Wanning didn't really like congee in the morning, made sure to pick straw mushrooms for the mushroom dish, stuffed the silk-thread rolls with sweet potato rather than bean paste, used only the tenderest tips of the bamboo shoots, and chose a cut of ham with a generous amount of fat, red and white streaked like dusky clouds across the horizon…

Mo Ran had never asked him what he liked to eat, yet he had made everything just right, as if they'd already lived together for many years.

Chu Wanning was delighted with the meal. Though he maintained his cool expression, his chopsticks never stopped shoveling for even a moment. When he finished the last sip of the soup and looked up, he saw Mo Ran sitting at the edge of the bed with one foot propped on a chair nearby, cheek in hand as he watched him with a faint smile.

"What is it?" Chu Wanning instinctively took out a handkerchief to wipe his mouth. "Is there something on my face…"

"Nope," Mo Ran said, "I'm just happy to see Shizun liked the food."

A little perturbed, Chu Wanning said in mild tones, “It was good, but there was too much rice. One bowl will do next time.”

Mo Ran seemed like he was about to say something, but in the end decided to let it lie. He grinned at him instead, revealing a row of neat, pearly teeth. “Got it.”

What a dummy this man was. So careful and meticulous about serious things, but absolutely oblivious when it came to the day-to-day. He had completely failed to notice that there were two pairs of chopsticks at the bottom of the box. He’d eaten two servings of food all by himself, then turned around to tell him that there was too much, that he was a bit stuffed…

The more Mo Ran thought about it the funnier it became, until he put a hand to his brow and let his lashes droop as they quivered with laughter.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing, nothing.” Mo Ran didn’t want to embarrass him—his shizun valued his pride above all else, after all—so he quickly changed the subject. “Shizun, I just remembered something that I forgot to ask you about yesterday.”

“What is it?”

“On my way back, I heard that Great Master Huaizui left the day before you came out of seclusion.”

“Mn, correct.”

“So you didn’t even see him after waking up, right?”

“I did not.”

Mo Ran sighed. “Then it’s not a matter of Shizun being discourteous at all. I overheard some people on the outside saying that Shizun had no manners, that even though Great Master Huaizui had spent the last five years bringing Shizun back to life, he didn’t even get a thanks for his trouble. But if the great master left first himself, it’d be totally unreasonable to expect Shizun to run over to Wubei Temple the instant he woke up, to kneel outside shedding tears of gratitude or something. Those gossips are so annoying. Now that we’ve cleared that up, I’ll have Uncle address it at tomorrow’s morning assembly—”

“No need,” Chu Wanning interjected.

"Why not?"

Chu Wanning paused. "The great master and I have long since burned our bridges," he said. "I wouldn't have thanked him even if he *were* still here when I woke up."

Mo Ran was taken aback. "How come? I know Shizun chose to leave the temple of your own volition and had already severed the master-disciple relationship with Great Master Huaizui, but he still came to your rescue in your time of need, and—"

"Things between him and me are hard to explain," Chu Wanning cut in. "Nor do I care to discuss it. If people want to call me a cold-blooded ingrate with no conscience, then so be it. It's only the truth."

"How is that the truth?" Mo Ran fretted. "You're clearly—you're clearly not that kind of person!"

Chu Wanning's head snapped up and his expression iced over, blood pumping like a dragon touched on its inverted scale. "Mo Ran," he said, "What do you even know about me?"

"I—" Mo Ran studied Chu Wanning's bright eyes, cold as frost. Here was a man who never let his guard down, who always kept his distance. For a moment, he wanted nothing more than to disregard all consequences and say, *I know. I know a lot of things about you. I understand, and even if there are some things in your past I don't know about, I'm willing to listen, to share the burden with you. Don't just keep everything to yourself, locked away behind those walls. Aren't you tired? Isn't it difficult?*

But what right did he have to say any of that? He was Chu Wanning's disciple. Be not impetuous. Be not irreverent.

In the end, Mo Ran said nothing.

Several seconds passed in silence, and Chu Wanning's tense frame, taut as a bowstring, finally relaxed by degrees. He sighed, as if depleted, and said, "People are not saints, and one cannot fight against fate. Certain things can't be changed even if you want them to be. Forget it; don't bring up Master Huaizui to me anymore. You may leave; I'm going to change."

"…Yes." Mo Ran quietly collected the meal box, his head hanging. As he reached the door, he suddenly asked, "Shizun,

you're not mad at me, are you?"

Chu Wanning shot him a glare. "Why would I be mad at you?"

Mo Ran beamed brightly. "That's good, that's good. Then can I come again tomorrow?"

"Suit yourself." Then, as if something had just occurred to him, Chu Wanning added, "In the future, there's no need to say things like 'I'm coming in.'"

Mo Ran blinked. "Why not?"

"You're going to come in anyway! What's the point in saying something like that?!" Chu Wanning was getting worked up again, but whether it was due to Mo Ran's untimely bout of purity or his own uselessly reddened face was anyone's guess.

Chu Wanning didn't get out of bed until after the still-perplexed Mo Ran had left. He didn't bother with shoes, but padded barefoot to the bookcase and removed a bamboo scroll. He unrolled it and stared at the words written there with an unreadable expression for long, silent minutes.

Huaizui had left this bamboo scroll by his pillow before leaving, with a spell that prevented anyone aside from Chu Wanning from opening it. The writing on the front was neat and straight, and read, *Confidential. For Chu-gongzi only.*

His own teacher calling him Chu-gongzi. Ridiculous.

The letter was neither long nor short. It listed some things Chu Wanning should be mindful of after waking up, before going to great length "entreating" him to do one thing.

Great Master Huaizui asked Chu Wanning to meet him at Dragonblood Mountain near Wubei Temple when he had recovered. He had written, in earnest terms, that he was getting on in years and was not long for the world, and that he felt immense guilt over certain things of the past.

This old monk hopes to speak with you before his passing. You still carry that old injury, and on hearing that its adverse effects force you to go into seclusion for ten days every seven years, this old monk feels truly remorseful. If you are willing to come to Dragonblood Mountain, it can be healed. However, the healing spell carries its own risks. You must also

bring along a disciple with dual wood- and fire-element spiritual energy to stabilize the array.

Old injury… Dragonblood Mountain…

Chu Wanning's brow furrowed deep, and his nails nearly drew blood from his palm. Healed? *How?* Something once destroyed, once lost, those one hundred and sixty-four days spent at Dragonblood Mountain—how could any of it ever be recovered? How masterly did Huaizui think he was, that he could smooth out a scar this deep?!

His eyes snapped open as golden light crackled in his palm. The sturdy mottled bamboo of the letter instantly shattered into powder in his hand and puffed into the air.

He would never set so much as a single foot into Wubei Temple for as long as he lived. Nor would he refer to Huaizui as Shizun ever again.

Four days had passed in the blink of an eye since Chu Wanning came out of seclusion. On the fourth day, Xue Zhengyong called him to Loyalty Hall and handed him a letter of commission. Chu Wanning shook open the letter and read the few simple lines written on it, then looked up and said, "I think you gave me the wrong one."

"Huh?" Xue Zhengyong took the letter and read over it again himself, then replied, "Nope, this is it."

Chu Wanning narrowed his eyes. "It says they need help with the harvest at Yuliang Village."

"What, do you not know how?"

Chu Wanning's glare intensified.

Xue Zhengyong's eyes went wide. "Wait, you seriously don't know how?!"

Backed into a corner by this line of questioning, Chu Wanning seethed. "Isn't there anything normal, like putting down demons or whatnot?"

Xue Zhengyong said, "Y'know, things have been pretty peaceful lately, so there actually *aren't* any places troubled by

demons right now. Aiya, it'll be fine! Ran-er's going with you, so you can just sit on the sidelines and take it easy while he does all the work. Harvesting some rice or threshing some millet's no big deal to the young and spry."

Chu Wanning's inky brows drew low. "Since when did Sisheng Peak start taking odd jobs like these?"

"Since…always? Like when Granny Wang's cat gets stuck in a tree in Wuchang Town, Shi Mei goes to get it down. It's just that there are usually tougher issues to deal with, so I never bothered you with the small ones," Xue Zhengyong said. "Besides, didn't you just wake up? I was gonna send someone else, but I thought you'd be bored just sitting around."

"But even then I don't… I don't want to harvest rice." Chu Wanning narrowly avoided blurting out that he didn't *know how* to harvest rice.

"Like I said, Ran-er will be there to help you out," Xue Zhengyong insisted. "Just consider it a chance to relax and stroll around a bit."

"Can I not relax and stroll around just fine without taking an assignment?"

"I mean, I guess." Xue Zhengyong scratched his head. "But Yuliang Village is pretty close to Butterfly Town and that Heavenly Rift Ran-er patched up last time. He's not you, after all, so why don't you check on it while you're there and see if there's anything that needs reinforcing?"

Only then did Chu Wanning finally see a need for him to go. He took the letter without another word and turned to leave Loyalty Hall.

Chapter 135:
Shizun Studies on the Sly

YULIANG VILLAGE was tiny. Many of its villagers were getting on in years and there were very few young people, so during harvest time, they would commonly ask the cultivators from Sisheng Peak for help.

Any other sect would have completely ignored requests like these that had nothing to do with cultivation. But Xue Zhengyong and his older brother had started Sisheng Peak from scratch and had endured their share of hardships in their youth. Rumor had it that, growing up, most of their meals had been taken at the tables of generous neighbors. Thus, Xue Zhengyong didn't have it in him to refuse such humble requests from the old tenant farmers and diligently attended to them, sending disciples to help every time. The village was far enough from Sisheng Peak that walking was inconvenient, but close enough that taking a carriage would be unnecessarily ostentatious. Thus, Xue Zhengyong had two fine horses prepared for Mo Ran and Chu Wanning.

It was late autumn, and the foliage had revealed its fall colors. When Chu Wanning came down the stairs to the main gate, he was greeted by the sight of Mo Ran standing beneath a tall maple tree, its scarlet, frost-adorned leaves rustling in the wind like the sheen on fine brocade or the splashing of red carp.

Mo Ran held the reins of a black horse, while a white horse nuzzled his cheek. He was in the middle of teasing them with a tuft of alfalfa flowers when he heard the sound of footsteps approaching. Fragments of red fluttered down as he turned to look over his shoulder, brightly beaming between the dancing leaves. "Shizun."

Chu Wanning's footsteps slowed, then came to a stop on the last few steps. Sunlight filtered through the luxuriant canopy to fall on the moss-covered stone. He stared at the man standing there, not so far away. Perhaps it was because they were setting off to do farm work, but Mo Ran wasn't wearing Sisheng Peak's disciple uniform today, nor was he wearing those white robes from when he'd first

returned. Instead, he had on black raiment with wrapped wrist guards, simple attire that accentuated his slim waist, long legs, and broad shoulders. He had a good figure, especially in the upper torso, where his open collar revealed a firm, toned chest the gold of honey, rising and falling with each breath.

If the showiness of Xue Meng's customary getup with its sparkling silver armor was like a peacock fanning its tail, then this look of Mo Ran's had a quiet allure, an innocent kind of allure, an uncomplicated kind of allure—in other words, the air it gave off said, *I'm a decent, upright person, I've never teased or provoked anyone in my life, and the only thing I know is honest work.*

Chu Wanning looked him up and down several times before opening his mouth to say, "Mo Ran."

The strapping young man replied with a smile, "Hm? What is it, Shizun?"

Chu Wanning's face was deadpan. "Aren't you cold with your lapels open that wide?"

After a moment of surprise, Mo Ran came to the conclusion that his shizun was expressing concern for him and felt suddenly giddy. He tossed the alfalfa back into the hay basket for the horses, dusted off his hands, and bounded up the bluestone steps to stand charmingly in front of Chu Wanning, grabbing him by the wrist before he could react.

"Not cold at all. Actually I'm kinda warm from rushing around all morning." He grinned guilelessly as he pressed Chu Wanning's hand to his own chest. "See, Shizun?"

It felt scalding. The young man's chest was hot to the touch. Combined with that strong heartbeat and those star-bright eyes, Chu Wanning could feel his entire back going numb. He ripped his hand away as his expression grew stormy. "Indecent."

Mo Ran misunderstood. "Ah…is it sweaty?" He thought that Chu Wanning wasn't into men—after all, their entanglement in his past life had been brought about by coercion on his part. So he didn't think Chu Wanning had any interest in him, and, remembering Chu Wanning's love of cleanliness and dislike of touching people, chalked his shizun's annoyance up to his sweatiness. Mo Ran felt embarrassed and scratched his head as he

said, “That was thoughtless of me…”

Had he looked closely, he would’ve seen the blush at the base of Chu Wanning’s elegant neck, and the glimmer of affection beneath those coolly downcast lashes. But he had missed that narrow window of opportunity, and Chu Wanning wasn’t about to give him another. Chu Wanning descended the slippery bluestone steps in his snow-white shoes, headed directly for the black horse, and mounted it in a single graceful motion, smooth as flowing water. With the sunlight gilding the land and red autumn leaves as far as the eye could see, the white-robed man sitting atop the tall black horse glanced over his shoulder at his disciple still on the ground. His face was like cool jade, exuding an air of loftiness, ever the sharp and handsome Yuheng Elder. “I’m off. Keep up.”

With that, those long legs tightened around the horse, spurring it into a gallop.

Mo Ran stood rooted in place for several moments. He picked up the bamboo basket, still half-filled with the alfalfa flowers he’d been feeding the horses, and tied it to the white horse’s saddle before leaping up himself, caught between laughter and tears. “But Shizun, the black horse is mine, don’t just… Shizun! Wait for me!”

On the backs of their swift horses, they arrived at Yuliang Village within the hour. A few acres of rice paddies stretched along the border of the village, and the breeze rolled in waves through the fields of golden grain. Some thirty-odd farmers toiled away in the paddies.

Due to the shortage of helping hands, young and old alike were working the fields, backs bent low and trouser legs rolled up as they swung their sickles, beads of sweat dripping from their faces with the exertion. Without any delay, Mo Ran found the village chief, handed him the letter of commission from Xue Zhengyong, then stepped into a pair of hemp shoes and made for the fields.

Mo Ran had both strength and stamina aplenty and was a cultivator to boot; harvesting crops was no trouble for him. In less than half a day, he’d harvested two whole rows of rice. As the golden ears piled up next to the paddy fields, soaking up the sunlight, the sweet scent of grain wafted through the air. The sound of the farmers’ sickles rustled across the plateaus, and a maiden sat

on the ridge between the paddy fields, singing a leisurely farming song as she gathered the grains:

"The sun setting behind a mountain shines like a red flower,

Painting all four mountains red, oh, red like peonies.

A red fan to sing my love song, a hydrangea to ask my loverboy,

Tugging at his belt, when are you coming?

Today I have no time, tomorrow I must chop firewood,

The day after I can come calling."

The farmer girl blithely sang these coy lyrics in that soft little tune, and the words drifted through the air and slipped into the hearts of the listeners.

"Today—I have no time, tomorrow I must chop firewood, the day after—I can come calling."

Chu Wanning did not go to work in the fields. Instead, he sat under a tree drinking from a jar of hot water. His eyes followed that black-clad, hard-working silhouette in the distance as he listened. His thoughts were all over the place, and the water he swallowed seemed to flow into his chest rather than his stomach, soaking it with heat.

"What an obscene song," he said coldly when he'd finished the water. He rose to return the ceramic jar to the village chief, who stared hesitantly at him. Chu Wanning asked irritably, "What is it?"

"Is…Xianjun not…going to work the fields?" The wizened village chief was a straightforward man. He directly answered the question in his shaky voice, white beard trembling and white brows creased. "Is Xianjun…just here to oversee things?"

Chu Wanning didn't know how to reply. Never before had he been put on the spot like this. Work the fields…? Hadn't Xue Zhengyong said he could just sit on the side and watch Mo Ran? Did he actually have to work too? He didn't know how!

But the old village chief was staring at him like he still had more to say, and a couple of kids and old women nearby, having heard the exchange, turned to stare at this immaculately dressed man.

Children hold nothing back. A little kid with his hair in buns asked brightly, “Granny, Granny, this daozhang-gege is all dressed in white. How is he going to do any work in the fields?”

“His sleeves are so wide…” Another kid murmured.

“And his shoes are so clean…”

Chu Wanning prickled all over with awkwardness. He stood there for a moment, but he was really too thin-skinned to remain idle after what he’d heard. He grabbed a sickle and waded into the paddy field without even removing his shoes. The slippery mud immediately clung to his feet, and the standing water rose past his ankles. Chu Wanning took two ginger steps, frowning at how slick everything felt, then tried swinging the sickle a couple of times. It was a fumbling attempt, as he knew nothing of the technique.

“*Pfft*…this daozhang-gege’s such a dum-dum.” A pair of little kids watching from under the mulberry tree laughed with their cheeks propped in their hands.

Chu Wanning fumed silently, his face darkening. He couldn’t stand to be near these people a moment longer; he summoned all the poise he possessed to keep his handsome face straight and his pace steady as he waded through the mud in great strides toward the figure busily cutting rice in the distance. The saying went that one could always learn from others; well, he was going to learn it on the sly. He stealthily observed Mo Ran at work.

When it came to farm work, Mo Ran was clearly more skilled than Chu Wanning. He was bent over under the blazing sun, each swing of his sickle reaping sheaves of golden rice that fell softly and obediently into his waiting embrace. He gathered large armfuls before tossing them into the bamboo basket behind him.

So absorbed was he in the task that he didn’t even notice Chu Wanning’s approach. His gaze was focused downward as he worked diligently, his straight nose casting a shadow across his cheek as a bead of sweat trickled down. A feral scent emanated from his body, scorching and wild, muted yet fervent. Under the sunlight, his skin was like red-hot steel that had just come out of the crucible, still crackling with sparks and hissing with steam—blindingly bright, beautifully brilliant.

Standing a short distance away, Chu Wanning enjoyed the

view for a while before abruptly realizing what he was doing. He frowned, shook his head, and muttered something under his breath, then continued wading forward with a straight face. He was going to learn, sneakily! He was just going to observe how Mo Ran held the sickle and what angle he swung it at. He would find out why the rice that was stiff as iron wires in his own hands became pliant as boneless maidens in Mo Ran's, falling so willingly and eagerly into his arms.

Chu Wanning was so absorbed in watching that he didn't notice the frog by his foot until it leapt up with a loud *"Ribbit!"* and hopped off toward the ridge. Caught by surprise, he jerked his leg back. But the paddy field was too slippery, and he was too unprepared. So it was that the great Yuheng Elder tipped forward, on track for a direct faceplant into the mud, all because of a single brazen frog!

With his face about to meet the mire, Chu Wanning had no time to cast anything. On reflex, he reached out to grab at the hard-working person before him.

The village maiden's singing sounded even more coquettish. "Tugging at his belt—when are you coming—"

As luck would have it, Chu Wanning latched onto Mo Ran's belt and stumbled forward a few steps to fall against a broad chest that was hot to the touch and musky with masculine scent, finding himself wrapped in a pair of strong, solid arms.

Chapter 136:
Shizun, Relax

MO RAN WAS MINDING his own business, reaping rice, when he felt a hand yanking his belt down from behind. That in itself was quite a shock. But it was an even bigger shock to turn around and find Chu Wanning, who was about to fall over.

Mo Ran hurriedly threw the sickle aside to catch him, but Chu Wanning had already stumbled halfway to the ground, where a supporting hand would be of no use. He had no choice: he had to grab him with both arms. That person, dressed in floating white robes and smelling faintly of haitang blossoms, landed solidly against his chest, and Mo Ran reflexively closed his arms around him in an embrace, scattering ears of rice all over the ground.

"Shizun, what are you doing here?" he asked, still shaken. "You scared me."

Chu Wanning did not respond.

"The paddy field is slippery, be careful."

The man in his arms still didn't look up or say anything, smothered by so much awkwardness that he couldn't speak. The village maiden continued warbling mercilessly, "Tugging at loverboy's belt—hey, when are you coming."

As if struck by lightning, Chu Wanning swiftly released Mo Ran's belt and got back on his own feet. He took a breath, then shoved Mo Ran away. Although his expression might have passed for calm, his eyes were frightfully bright, like rolling waves catching the sunlight—obviously flustered yet determinedly faking some composure.

Mo Ran suddenly noticed that Chu Wanning's earlobes were red. It was a pretty color, a light pinkness to the skin like tender peaches at the tips of branches. He thought abruptly of the way those earlobes had tasted as he sucked on them in the previous lifetime, the way Chu Wanning had trembled lightly every time, and the way that, despite his utmost unwillingness, that steel-boned body had gone soft and yielding in his arms. Mo Ran swallowed, his

gaze unconsciously growing deep and dark…

But Chu Wanning was absolutely livid—though it was uncertain at whom—snarling between gritted teeth, “What are you staring for! What’s there to look at!”

Mo Ran jolted back to reality, his blood running cold. *Beast!*

What despicable things had he done to his shizun out of his selfish desire in the past? With his shizun’s pride, how could he accept being taken like that? Someone as dispassionate as he was probably didn’t even feel desire to begin with. How dare he think about these deplorable things again!

Mo Ran mutely shook his head over and over again like a rattle drum.

“What are you shaking your head for!” Chu Wanning snapped, “Am I a joke to you?!”

Mo Ran remained silent but immediately stilled. He secretly snuck a glance at Chu Wanning. The man was clearly embarrassed but trying to mask it with anger as he always did. Those eyes of his were a tell now that Mo Ran was looking closely. He was probably just embarrassed to have tripped in front of his own disciple, and due to a croaking frog at that.

How cute. Mo Ran couldn’t help a chuckle at the thought.

But the laughter only made Chu Wanning angrier, his brows sharp with fury as he flew into a rage. “What are you laughing at?! So what if I don’t know how to do farm work; what’s so funny about that?!”

“Nothing—nothing funny, nope,” Mo Ran said soothingly as he tucked his smile away and adjusted his face into a serious expression. Yet he couldn’t hide the smile in his eyes, bright and shining with amusement.

Still, he held his laughter in. Just as it seemed that this matter was over, the frog from before puffed out its throat and let out two more self-righteous croaks, as if in a show of force. Mo Ran’s self-control slipped. He tried to turn away and cough into his fist to cover it. But he fumbled that too and let out a *“pfft”* of laughter.

Chu Wanning fumed mutely. He was really about to lose it, dragging his muddied robes behind him as he made for the ridge in

a towering rage, when he heard Mo Ran call to him.

There was hardly any distance between them. Mo Ran could have just reached out and grabbed him—but he didn't, because he could still feel Chu Wanning's warmth against his chest and could still smell the scent of haitang from Chu Wanning's robes. His heart felt mushy, like it was about to melt.

But he didn't dare succumb. This person before him was so good; he wanted to treasure him, to cherish him, to revere him as he would a god. He didn't want to hurt him any more with his vulgar desires.

So he only called out, "Shizun."

"What, not done laughing yet?" Chu Wanning glared sidelong at him.

Mo Ran's dimpled smile was filled not with mocking, but gentleness. "Do you want to learn? I'll teach you. It's actually quite simple, and Shizun is so smart; you'll definitely pick it right up."

As Mo Ran started to teach him how to reap the rice, Chu Wanning couldn't help but wonder how things had turned out this way. He had come over with the intention of learning by covert observation, so how had he ended up in an official apprenticeship? What a mess.

But Mo Ran was teaching him so seriously and attentively, and didn't even laugh at his clumsy attempts. His brows were ink-black, and his features were sharper and more defined than when he was younger. It should have given him a handsome and arrogant air, but his gaze was gentle and patient, as if hiding a great many burdens that weighed on him. Or perhaps hiding nothing at all—only conveying a depth of tenderness, the weight of the years.

"Just like this, it's all in the wrist, get it?"

A long pause, then: "Mn."

Chu Wanning tried swinging the sickle as instructed, but still couldn't quite master it. He was used to carving up stiff blocks of wood in his work, but these soft stalks of grain were somehow harder to handle. Mo Ran observed him for a while, then reached out a toned arm and adjusted his grip on the sickle.

Skin brushed skin for only an instant; Mo Ran didn't dare

touch him more than that, and neither did Chu Wanning dare allow it. One was a torrential stream with nowhere to go, and the other a pond that was all but dried up. They were clearly a perfect match—if only one were to go into the other, the former would no longer churn restlessly with no outlet, and the latter could be filled and watered, parched cracks soon mended.

But neither of them would do it, each hiding from the other.

Mo Ran explained from behind him, "Move your finger a little lower, careful not to cut yourself."

"I know," came the stiff response.

"Relax a little, don't be so tense."

Chu Wanning shifted slightly.

"Relax."

But the more Mo Ran said it, the more Chu Wanning's back tensed and his grip stiffened. Relax, relax, relax—it wasn't like he didn't *want* to! Easy for him to say! But Mo Ran was hovering right next to him, his breath practically caressing the back of his ear, hot and heavy, carrying this man's unique, wild scent—*how was he supposed to relax?!*

For some reason, his wretched brain chose this exact moment to recall that shameful dream. They had been in a similar position then, with Mo Ran's lips beside his ear, touching it yet not, ghosting along his earlobe. He had said between panting breaths, "Relax a little…don't clench around me so tightly…"

Chu Wanning's entire face turned red.

He tried his best to squirm away from these weird thoughts, but a second wave rolled in right on the heels of the first, and he struggled free only to recall that "Size Ranking of the Cultivation World's Young Heroes" booklet instead…

Chu Wanning couldn't make a sound; he was afraid there might be smoke rising from the top of his head.

But Mo Ran was none the wiser. "Why are you so tense? Re—"

"I am *quite* relaxed!" Chu Wanning whipped around, eyes a little teary yet filled with flames of anger, so close his glare was like a sword piercing Mo Ran's heart.

The hearts of each were clearly drumming fast in their chests, but the other could not hear that drumming, no matter how loud. Not unless he were to step closer, not unless he were to press his chest against his back, not unless he were to grab his hand, bite his ear, suck on his earlobe, murmur to him between heavy breaths, *Relax, don't be so nervous.* Only in this way would they understand each other.

But Mo Ran would never do it, and neither would Chu Wanning.

So Mo Ran awkwardly withdrew his hand and sheepishly straightened up, asking carefully, "Then, does Shizun want to try again like this?"

"Mn."

Mo Ran flashed him another smile before picking up his own sickle and resuming his work not too far away. Two sweeps of the sickle later, he seemed to remember something, and called over his shoulder: "Shizun."

"What?" Chu Wanning's face was sullen.

Mo Ran pointed at his feet. "You should take off your boots."

"I will not."

"You might slip wearing them," Mo Ran said earnestly. "Those boots have smooth soles. I won't always be there to catch you if you slip."

Chu Wanning mulled it over in gloomy silence, then waded over to the ridge and removed his shoes and socks. He tossed them next to a haystack before treading with bare feet back into the paddy field to slog away at the rice.

By noon, Chu Wanning had finally become more or less proficient with the sickle, his motions growing fluid. The rice reaped by Mo Ran and himself piled into a mighty little mountain of gold. After harvesting another row, Chu Wanning finally felt a little fatigued and straightened up to take a deep breath and wipe his sweat with the corner of a sleeve. A light breeze swept through the golden waves of grain, bringing with it a refreshing autumn chill. He sneezed. Mo Ran turned around immediately in concern.

"Are you cold?"

“I’m fine.” Chu Wanning shook his head. “Some dust got in my nose just now.”

Mo Ran smiled and was about to say more when the clear voice of a village maiden rang out from beneath the mulberry tree in the distance, hands cupped around her mouth as she shouted, “Lunchtime—it’s lunchtime—!”

“It’s the girl who was singing earlier,” Chu Wanning commented without even turning to look.

Mo Ran turned and lifted a hand to shade his brow, squinting into the distance. “It really is her. Shizun can tell by her voice?”

“Mn, all that warbling just to announce a meal; who else could it be?” Chu Wanning passed the last basket of rice over to the pile as he spoke, then made for the mulberry tree. He didn’t bother with his shoes; his feet were already dirty anyway. Mo Ran shook his head with a grin, then scooped up his shizun’s abandoned boots before running to catch up.

Lunch was a communal affair cooked in large pots, brought out by four or five women in three wooden barrels. The lids were lifted to reveal a barrel full of steaming rice, another of braised pork with cabbage, and one more filled with tofu and vegetable soup.

Frankly, life for the common folk in the lower cultivation realm wasn’t easy, and meat was considered a luxury to most. But Sisheng Peak’s cultivators had come, and what kind of host would the village chief be if he fed them nothing but vegetables? Thus, there was a hearty portion of cured, marbled meat in the pork and cabbage dish. The moment the lids came off, all the burly villagers, smelling that savory aroma, had to swallow their drool.

“It’s not much; Xianjun, please make do.” The village chief’s wife was a stocky woman in her fifties with a brassy voice and a wide, unreserved grin. “We cured the meat and picked the vegetables ourselves, hope ya don’t mind.”

Mo Ran frantically waved his hand. “Of course not.” He scooped two heaping bowls of rice and handed them to his shizun before fetching a third bowl for himself.

Chu Wanning peeked into the barrel and saw that the braised pork dish was scattered with a layer of chili peppers. He was still gazing apprehensively when the auntie waved him over with

enthusiasm and ladled an enormous scoop of red-hot gravy into his bowl, generously laden with bright-red meat.

Chu Wanning stared down into the bowl. This would be a delicious treat to the people of Sichuan, who loved spicy foods. But to Chu Wanning, this bowl spelled certain doom. Yet it wasn't as if he could decline the hospitality of the villagers either.

As he stood frozen in uncertainty, a hand reached over with another bowl, filled with tofu and vegetable soup. It was rather plain, but suited to Chu Wanning's tastes.

"Here, swap with me," said Mo Ran.

Chu Wanning eyed the proffered bowl. "It's fine. Eat your own."

The auntie was puzzled by this exchange. Then she put two and two together and smacked her head, hollering, "Aiya, can this xianjun not eat spicy food?"

Seeing the guilt on her face, Chu Wanning replied, "No, I can eat it a little." Grasping his chopsticks, he picked up some of the rice soaked with spicy gravy and popped it in his mouth.

A few moments passed in silence, Chu Wanning's face growing redder by the second as everyone watched. Even the tightly-pursed line of his lips began to quiver, until—

"Cough cough cough cough!"

An earthshaking coughing fit.

Who was it who said the only unbearable things in this world were love, destitution, and sneezes? They had clearly forgotten about chili peppers. Chu Wanning had woefully overestimated himself and sorely underestimated the chilis, with the result that he now choked so badly on the spice that his entire face was beet red, and he couldn't speak at all. The adult onlookers were aghast, while the kids—being kids—giggled from behind them, earning themselves swats on the head.

Mo Ran hastily set down the bowl and chopsticks he was holding and scooped another bowl of mild soup for him. The liquid seemed to help a little, but the hot soup on top of the heavy spice made Chu Wanning's tongue feel like it was on fire. When he looked up at Mo Ran, his face was flushed and his eyes watery as he

said in a hoarse voice, “More.”

More.

Chu Wanning clearly meant *more soup*, but Mo Ran felt his whole body set alight by the sight of those teary eyes, that face the color of haitang flowers in early spring, and his thoughts drifted off course of their own volition.

For an instant, his mind conjured up an image from his past life: this man lying beneath him, panting both from need and the effects of the aphrodisiac, open eyes glazed and unfocused, body trembling ever so slightly, voice hoarse as those moist lips parted in soft moans. “Please…more…”

Chapter 137:
Shizun and I Get Settled In

THE TIPS of Mo Ran's fingers quivered slightly, and his heart felt like it was going to beat right out of his chest.

The worst thing about men was that the brain between their legs never listened to the brain atop their shoulders. Regardless of how much Mo Ran really, truly, whole-heartedly wished it wouldn't, the wretched thing still grew hot and hard, making him feel numb and prickly all over. Cursing himself under his breath, he adjusted how he sat so no one would see before leaning over to dish out another bowl of soup for Chu Wanning.

But his fingertips brushed against Chu Wanning's as he reached over to hand him the bowl. The contact sent a jolt through his spine that made his hand shudder, spilling a few drops of soup.

Chu Wanning frowned slightly, but he had more pressing concerns to attend to. He took the soup and gulped it down to ease the spicy numbness in his mouth. Beside him, Mo Ran stared wordlessly at those lips that were vivid red from the spice, like a ripe fruit peeking between leaves or a vibrant blossom upon a branch. Lips that, if kissed, would be soft, warm, moist…

With a sharp *crack,* Mo Ran slapped himself, hard. Everyone stared in surprise.

Finally coming back down to earth, Mo Ran cleared his throat awkwardly and said in a rough voice, "There was a mosquito on my face."

"Aiyo." A clear female voice rang out and began raise a fuss. "Autumn mosquitos are the worst, just looking to suck enough blood to get through the winter. Did Xianjun bring any medicinal salve?"

"Huh?" Mo Ran looked toward the source of the voice, somewhat bewildered. The speaker was a fetching young woman, her comely figure wrapped in a blue coat and her shiny black hair brushed into a braid. She had a pretty face and fair skin, but when she caught his eye, her sultry gaze was anything but shy. Sadly,

Mo Ran didn't quite catch on. He only thought, *Oh, the girl who was singing earlier.*

Mo Ran might've been slow, but the auntie sitting next to the lass wasn't. She'd borne seven children, and she could read these little misses like an open book. Without missing a beat, she came in with an assist: "They're only here for a few weeks to help with the harvest; of course they didn't bring any salve. Ling-er, go deliver a jar to them later."

The lass called Ling-er beamed happily. "Of course. I'll come by tonight."

Mo Ran blinked. This enthusiastic pair had already made the decision before he could get a word in edgewise. He was left a little speechless. He turned to Chu Wanning and found him wiping the spilled soup from his hand with a handkerchief, a touch of distaste in his expression. Mo Ran was no good at dealing with women. He said to Chu Wanning in a small voice, "Some of the soup got on my hand too. Let me borrow the handkerchief when you're done?"

Chu Wanning handed it to him, the same haitang-embroidered handkerchief he'd carried before. Mo Ran remembered he'd had it with him back at the Peach Blossom Springs too. Chu Wanning looked cold and distant, but he was actually a sentimental person. This was something Mo Ran had noticed in his past life. The clues were in the type of clothing he wore and the way the decor in his room stayed mostly unchanged throughout the years. But he hadn't expected it to extend to even this handkerchief. The little square of cloth was so old that the once-colorful embroidery had gone dull, yet this nostalgic person still hadn't discarded it.

Mo Ran cleaned his hand, then took another look at the handkerchief. Upon closer inspection, he was surprised to find that the flower, although carefully embroidered, was clearly the work of a beginner, with rather poor needlework. He thought his shizun must have done it himself when he was bored, and he imagined the way he must have looked, all serious and straight-faced while stitching the haitang flower with a tiny needle. Mo Ran wanted to burst into laughter.

He wanted to study the handkerchief some more, but Chu Wanning reached over and retrieved it. "What are you taking it away for?" Mo Ran asked. "I'll wash it."

“I can wash it myself,” Chu Wanning replied, and he picked up his bowl of spicy pork once more.

Mo Ran was not about to watch him tempt fate again. He hastily swapped their bowls. “Here, have this bowl instead; I haven’t touched it.”

The village chief’s wife hurried to agree. “It’s all right if Xianjun can’t handle spicy food. No worries, no worries.”

Chu Wanning pressed his lips into a line, then lowered his eyes and said, “Sorry about that,” before exchanging bowls with Mo Ran.

Taking Chu Wanning’s bowl and chopsticks in hand, Mo Ran was about to dig in when it struck him that Chu Wanning had already eaten from the bowl. His heart, suddenly soft and warm, started pounding. He picked up a piece of marbled meat and lifted it to his mouth, the chopsticks scraping past his teeth, sliding past his lips…

What improper, preposterous things hadn’t he done with Chu Wanning in the past life? Yet in this one, the mere touch of chopsticks Chu Wanning had used against his own tongue, the bowl he’d eaten from held to his own lips—just these caused the flame within him to grow to uncontrollable proportions. Regardless of how harshly he admonished himself, how many times he told himself not to entertain such indecent thoughts about his pure, virtuous shizun, it was like his heart wasn’t even his—he could keep himself from touching Chu Wanning, but he couldn’t make himself stop thinking about him.

Mo Ran had long renounced his hatred of Chu Wanning. He had imagined that peeling away the hate would leave only feelings of respect and the desire to cherish his shizun. But he was wrong. What had been revealed when the black veil of hatred fell away was tender affection and searing desire. He floated in that ocean of desires, wanted to cling to the driftwood of rationality until he could climb ashore, but just one glance from Chu Wanning, one lightly spoken word, was enough to pull him back down into the abyss of yearning.

He felt like he had truly gone mad.

Chu Wanning wasn’t into men, so Mo Ran would sooner die

than touch or harass him. And so the desire in him burned until it was a blazing inferno, swelled until it was a vast ocean, and he, drowning and burning, cared for little else save the person before him, this pure person who filled him with impure thoughts.

The autumn breeze picked up, carrying on its back the fragrance of the harvest and a chorus of frog song, and in that moment, sitting next to Chu Wanning, Mo Ran had the thought—the absurd, ridiculous thought—that it wouldn't be so bad to spend the rest of their lives like this. He'd once felt like he had nothing, and had fought for everything as if his life depended on it. But now he felt like he had everything, and dared not ask for more.

The busy season for these farmers lasted a little over half a month, during which Chu Wanning and Mo Ran would be staying at Yuliang Village. The little village could spare two rooms for them, but they were rather barren, given how poor the village was. The village chief's wife gritted her teeth and produced two thick cotton mattresses for them, only to have her offer declined in unison.

Chu Wanning said, "We can sleep on the straw, it's warm enough. Please keep the mattresses for yourselves."

Mo Ran agreed with a smile, "We're cultivators, you know. We can't just take your bedding like that."

The village chief was guilt-ridden. "We're really sorry about this," he said, over and over. "We had more mattresses before, but there was a fire last year when we were beset by an evil spirit, and a lot of things…"

"It's all right," Chu Wanning said.

After a few more words of consolation, the village chief and his wife finally excused themselves tremulously. Mo Ran set about adjusting Chu Wanning's bed, packing more straw under the padding in hopes of making it softer. He looked rather a lot like a dog dragging cushions and pillows to its nest.

Chu Wanning, leaning against a table and mildly looking on, said, "That's enough; any more and I'll be sleeping in a haystack instead of a bed."

A little embarrassed, Mo Ran scratched his head and said, "There wasn't time today, but tomorrow I'll go to the nearby market

and buy Shizun a proper mattress."

"And am I supposed to do all the farm work while you go skipping off to the market?" Chu Wanning shot him a glare. "Just leave it; it's fine." He walked over and took a sniff. "It has that nice scent of fresh straw."

Mo Ran protested, "No way, Shizun is no good with the cold; you can't just…"

Chu Wanning frowned. "It's not winter yet. What is all this fuss? Go back to your room already; it's been a long day. I can't even feel my feet anymore—I'm going to bed."

Mo Ran left obediently. Chu Wanning kicked off his shoes, haphazardly rinsed his feet with water from the large clay jar in the room, and was about to climb into his straw bed when he heard knocking at the door. Mo Ran had returned and was calling from the outside, "Shizun, I'm coming in!"

Chu Wanning was furious. He sat speechless for a long moment before eventually snapping, "Didn't I tell you not to say that to me anymore!"

As Chu Wanning fumed, Mo Ran grinned and nudged the door open with his head. He had to use his head because both his hands —with sleeves rolled to the elbows to reveal firm, shapely, honey-brown arms—were occupied by a steaming basin of clear water. The young man's eyes seemed especially bright behind the steam, practically sparkling. Chu Wanning's heart raced under his gaze, and he found himself at a sudden loss for words.

Mo Ran hauled the heavy basin over and set it down beside his bed. Face glowing and dimples warm, he said, "Shizun, you worked too hard today. Soak your feet first, then let me give you a foot rub before you go to sleep."

"No—"

"I know, I know, Shizun's gonna say *no need*," Mo Ran said with a smile. "But there is a need. It's your first time doing farm work, you're going to be achy all over. If you can't get a good night's rest because of that and can't get up tomorrow, the little kids in the village are going to make fun of you again."

The water in the wooden basin was hot—slightly too hot, but

not unbearably so. Chu Wanning's bare feet sank into the water, toes smooth and delicate, the lines of his ankles flowing and defined. His feet never saw the sun, and so the skin there was pale and even. Mo Ran, taking it all in, marveled at how nice Chu Wanning's skin was, even fairer and smoother than that of delicate ladies. Come to think of it, even that woman Song Qiutong whom he'd married in his past life hadn't felt as nice as Chu Wanning did…

Bah, what was he *thinking* about.

While Chu Wanning soaked his feet, Mo Ran sat down at the table across the room and started to read a book. He'd brought it along himself, some dry tome about healing spells.

It was so quiet that both unconsciously slowed their breathing so the other wouldn't hear. In that room lit by a single candle, the only sound was of Chu Wanning's feet occasionally moving in the water.

"I'm done soaking; it doesn't ache anymore. You can go now."

But Mo Ran was persistent—he knew better now than to take Chu Wanning at his word when he said things like *it doesn't hurt* and *I'm fine*. He set down his book and came over to Chu Wanning's bed, where he knelt and grabbed the foot Chu Wanning instinctively tried to pull back. Mo Ran, down on one knee, looked up with eyes that were not going to take no for an answer. "I'll go after I give Shizun a foot rub."

Chu Wanning deeply wanted to kick him. Maybe then he would get the hell out instead of saying whatever the fuck he wanted in his presence. But the hand gripping him was so strong and callused. The rough skin on the pads of Mo Ran's fingers and between his thumb and forefinger rubbed against Chu Wanning's foot, where the skin was extra ticklish from soaking in the hot water. He was so busy trying not to laugh that he missed his last opportunity to save his dignity and boot Mo Ran out.

Kneeling on the floor, Mo Ran brought Chu Wanning's foot up to his knee and began to massage it, gently and carefully, eyes downcast in concentration. "Shizun, was it cold in the paddy field?"

"It was all right."

“There were tons of dead branches and debris in there; look, you got scratched on the side here.”

Chu Wanning looked at the side of his right foot; sure enough, there was a small cut. “It’s just a scratch; I can hardly feel it.”

Mo Ran said, insistent, “I packed some herbal ointment for such things. Wait here a moment, Shizun. I’ll go grab it and put it on for you. Auntie made it so it’s really good; it’ll be healed up by morning.” So saying, he stepped out the door toward his room, which was opposite Chu Wanning’s across a small courtyard only a dozen steps wide. In no time, he returned with a jar of sweet-smelling ointment.

“Isn’t this an overreaction?”

“Of course not. What if it gets infected? C’mere, Shizun, gimme your foot.”

Chu Wanning found this awkward. In all his years, he’d kept his feet a private matter. He was always meticulously dressed and never went anywhere barefoot. This was a part of him that scarcely anyone alive had seen, let alone touched.

Once massaged, twice shy: he'd let Mo Ran touch him earlier because he hadn't known what it would feel like. The sore, tender sensation had been wholly unexpected and had made him feel all tingly inside. Now, he was a little hesitant to yield his foot again.

Mo Ran stared at that pair of feet peeking hesitantly from under the robes, pale and white with a bloom of rosiness from their hot soak. Chu Wanning's toes were fine and delicate, with nails as translucent as the frozen surface of a lake in winter, and a tender pink blush at the tips. Like budding haitang blossoms frozen beneath the ice.

Mo Ran knelt back down, his expression gentle and reverent as he took this warm haitang flower in hand. He could feel it trembling minutely, petals quivering, and was struck by the sudden urge to dip his head and press a kiss to it, so that it wouldn't hesitate or be afraid, so that it might blossom and unfold.

"Shizun…"

"What is it?" There seemed to be a rawness to Chu Wanning's voice, like the branches of a flowering tree laden with the weight of desire, blossoms on the verge of giving way, droplets of dew poised to fall on parched soil.

Mo Ran's head snapped up. The candle flame chose that precise moment to crackle, setting free a burst of sparks as a small stream of wax dripped slowly down. His gaze collided with Chu Wanning's, and in the glow of the candle, both their eyes were bright with desire. With hunger. "Do you…"

Chu Wanning looked away and said, mildly, "Get on with it. My feet are ticklish."

Mo Ran's entire face went red, but fortunately, the splash of color was concealed by his tan. He mumbled an acknowledgement and lowered his head to apply the ointment, the blush burning all the way to his ears. He couldn't help but hear *Get on with it* echo over and over in his head.

He swallowed, eyes fixed on the soft skin before him. Images from the past surfaced in his mind, becoming clear, coming into focus. He remembered the disheveled bedding in Wushan Palace, the way Chu Wanning had looked all the fairer against those scarlet

sheets, the way they had entangled like caged beasts, neck against neck, heavy pants and low groans filling the hall with a ferocious, savage tension.

He thought of Chu Wanning's muted moans, that icy voice melted into flowing water by the flames of desire, then heated into a boil. He could almost hear Chu Wanning's voice by his ear: "Stop messing around…*ah*…"

Mo Ran squeezed his eyes shut, his brow furrowed deep. In this moment, he finally realized something: it wasn't going to be easy for him to treat Chu Wanning well. If he were to keep his distance, he wouldn't be able to take good care of him or keep him warm. But if he were to stay close, he might not be able to control this flame of desire. He was afraid his rationality might catch fire in a moment of carelessness, that he might do something outrageous.

He wanted him, wanted to bed him. Even at this very second, he suddenly thought that he didn't really want to be kneeling in front of Chu Wanning, giving him foot rubs and applying ointment to his cuts. This person was sitting there in front of him, on the bed, and Mo Ran was just as strong as he had been in the past. Chu Wanning wouldn't be able to push him off.

He wanted to take him, wanted to press him down onto that bed. He wanted it so bad his throat felt parched, wanted it so bad it burned and ached. He wanted to kiss the breath out of Chu Wanning, he wanted…

"All done, Shizun!" he said in a near-yell, startling Chu Wanning. Only Mo Ran knew of the cold sweat drenching his own back. All at once, he felt so miserable—why couldn't he just care for his shizun in a clean, genuine way? Why couldn't he just be rid of this burning desire?

Chu Wanning, Chu Wanning…

His shizun was the loftiest person in the world. If he were to find out how his own disciple felt toward him, how disdainful would he be, how scornful? It had been two lifetimes. Mo Ran no longer wanted to be regarded with scorn by this man.

Chu Wanning pulled his boots back on. The whole time, Mo Ran sat to the side with his head lowered wordlessly, looking like a docile, obedient dog. Only he knew of the insatiable wolf he

had locked up inside.

A long moment passed before Mo Ran managed to suppress the burning in his chest. He said, “Shizun, rest well. If you feel unwell at all tomorrow, then please just stay in; I can do both our shares of work.”

Before Chu Wanning could reply, a delicate voice drifted in from the outside. “Mo-xianjun? Mo-xianjun, are you there?”

Chapter 138:
Shizun Just Might Blue-Ball Me to Death

CHU WANNING directed a mild glance at Mo Ran. “Some-one’s looking for you.”

“Ah? Who could be looking for me at this hour?” Mo Ran, whose mind was completely occupied by Chu Wanning, had long since forgotten whatever had happened during the day with the villagers.

“It’s the young lady who was singing earlier,” Chu Wanning said in a pointedly understated tone. “You know, the prettiest girl in the village.”

“Eh, really…? All the girls in the village look more or less the same to me…”

Chu Wanning was silent for a moment. “I was only gone for five years. When did you go blind?”

Mo Ran blinked in surprise. Chu Wanning’s tone was unchanged, but when Mo Ran looked up, he caught a hint of a smile in Chu Wanning’s eyes, as if teasing him with good-humored banter. Pleasantly surprised, Mo Ran felt his mood instantly lift.

Outside, the village girl named Ling-er was holding a bundle wrapped in blue cloth with a white floral pattern, hollering as loud as she could at Mo Ran’s door, “Mo-xianjun, Mo—”

“I’m over here.”

Ling-er turned at the sound of a man’s deep voice behind her, only to see Mo Ran leaning in the doorway, lifting one side of the curtain and smiling at her. “It’s already so late; did you need something?”

Ling-er was momentarily startled, but her shock quickly melted into delight. Happily, she went to him. “Good thing Xianjun hasn’t gone to bed yet! Here, this is for you. I got it from my auntie, like I mentioned during lunch earlier. P…please use it.” She pushed the cloth bag she carried into his arms as she spoke.

Mo Ran opened the bag and found three little clay jars. “What

are these?"

"Medicinal salve," Ling-er explained brightly, pointing at her own cheek with a smile. "For your mosquito bite, in the field earlier…"

"Ah." Mo Ran finally remembered what this was all about. He found himself a little abashed that the girl had so wholeheartedly believed his offhand excuse and come all this way to give him the salve. The villagers here were rather too gullible…

"You must've not gotten bit too badly though." Ling-er raised herself up on tiptoe and gave Mo Ran's face a careful once-over, smiling even more sunnily. "I don't even see a bump."

Mo Ran cleared his throat. "I *am* a cultivator, after all…"

Ling-er clapped her hands with a laugh. "You cultivators are so interesting! If I had the talent for it, I'd want to become one too. Too bad it's not in the stars for me."

They chatted a bit longer until Mo Ran thanked her and ducked back inside with the salve. Chu Wanning had moved to the table and was flipping idly through the book Mo Ran had abandoned. He looked up when he heard Mo Ran come in.

"Medicinal salve," Mo Ran explained bashfully.

"Did you really get bit? Come here, let me see."

Under the candlelight, Mo Ran's skin was the deep amber of honey candy, accentuating his dashing features. Chu Wanning stared for a while before asking, "So…where's the bite?"

Mo Ran scratched his head, embarrassed. "It went down already; my skin's thick." He set all three jars of the refreshing medicinal salve on Chu Wanning's table as he spoke. "I don't need these. Shizun should hang onto them instead since you're more likely to get bug bites."

Chu Wanning neither accepted nor declined. "First the herbal ointment and now this medicinal salve… I'll have to open an apothecary at this rate."

Mo Ran only rubbed at his handsome nose and beamed, quiet and sincere. Chu Wanning reached out and poked at his forehead. "It's getting late. Go back to your room and go to sleep."

“Mn. Sleep well, Shizun.”

“Sleep well.”

But that night, in those two run-down straw huts separated by that small courtyard the width of ten steps, neither of the two found sleep. Despite their exchanged wishes, both tossed and turned restlessly. Chu Wanning could still feel the tingling in his feet, could practically still feel Mo Ran’s callused fingers rubbing against his skin. Mo Ran’s thoughts were rather more complicated. He shifted this way and that, head pillowed on his arm while he tapped fitfully at the seam between the bed boards, repeating over and over in his head: *Shizun is a god, an immortal, an otherworldly being; no matter what happened in the past life, I definitely won’t do anything stupid in this one; I definitely won’t bully him, definitely won’t mess things up again…*

And besides, there was still Shi Mei. Yes, he should think more about Shi Mei instead—Shi Mei…

He suddenly felt doubly uneasy. The fact was, since returning to Sisheng Peak and reuniting with Shi Mei, Mo Ran had found himself feeling rather lukewarm toward him. To him, liking Shi Mei and protecting Shi Mei had settled into a kind of habit, a thing that he consistently did—but to what end? He still felt fond of the Shi Mei of five years ago, but the beautiful man of today was like a stranger to him. This new unfamiliarity left him at a loss; he didn’t know what was wrong with him, or what he ought to do about it.

Chu Wanning woke up early the next morning. When he stepped outside, he came face-to-face with Mo Ran, who was lifting the curtain of his own room.

“Good morning, Shizun,” Mo Ran said.

“Morning.” Chu Wanning glanced at him. “Didn’t sleep well?”

Mo Ran summoned up a smile. “I’m not really used to the bed. It’s all right, I’ll just take a nap later.”

They set off toward the fields together, the early morning breeze bringing the refreshing fragrance of grass and trees. It was quiet on their walk over, the silence broken only by the occasional singing of frogs and chirping of cicadas. Chu Wanning yawned

languidly, then caught something out of the corner of his eye that made him smile.

"Mo Ran."

"Mm?"

Chu Wanning reached over to brush through Mo Ran's bangs and plucked a piece of straw from his hair. He said with a small smile, "What were you doing, rolling around in bed? You've got straw in your hair."

Mo Ran was about to defend himself when he spotted a piece of straw on the side of Chu Wanning's head as well. He also smiled and said, "Then Shizun must've been rolling around too." And picked the golden straw off Chu Wanning's hair.

As the sun crested the eastern horizon, master and disciple gazed at each other against a backdrop of resplendent gold, one with his head slightly lowered, the other with his head slightly tipped up, just the way they had in the past. Except that, five years ago, the one looking down had been Chu Wanning, and the one gazing up had been Mo Ran. But the years had flown by, and Mo Weiyu was no longer a youth.

In this moment, it was as if time was finally willing to slow down. In the light of that gentle dawn, Mo Ran jumped into the paddy field on impulse, opening his arms and smiling at the man standing on the raised ridge. "Shizun, jump. I'll catch you."

Chu Wanning eyed the drop from the ridge to the field. It was only waist high. "Is something wrong with your head?"

"Ha ha ha."

He took off his shoes and gracefully hopped down into the paddy field himself, sending a ripple through the water and a chill up through the bottom of his feet. With a grand sweep of one broad sleeve and an air of imposing dignity, Chu Wanning claimed a large stretch of the field for himself. "This whole area is mine. I didn't cut as much as you yesterday, but today I fully intend to beat you."

Mo Ran's outstretched arms went instead to scratch his head. The corners of his lips quirked up and an especially charming smile spread across his face. "Okay. If I lose, I'll make Shizun lots and lots of lotus crisp and lots and lots of stewed crab meatballs."

“And lots and lots of honey-glazed sweet lotus root too.” Chu Wanning added.

“Sure thing. But what if Shizun loses?” Mo Ran’s eyes were clear and bright, like they enclosed the entire starry sky. “Then what?”

Chu Wanning shot him a cool sidelong glance. “What do you want?”

Mo Ran mulled it over for some time, chewing on his bottom lip. Finally, he said, “If Shizun loses, Shizun will have to eat all the lotus crisp and stewed crab meatballs I make.” A pause. And then, in an even gentler tone, carried on the refreshing breeze: “And all the honey-glazed sweet lotus root too.”

Win or lose, I just want an excuse to treat you well.

In this short interval, Chu Wanning had gotten quite adept at harvesting rice—and he did not like to lose. It was enough that he had been laughed at yesterday; he was *not* going to be the butt of jokes today too. Huffily thinking thus, he worked with singular diligence, slicing away at the stalks, and by midday he’d cut down a good deal more than Mo Ran. He felt rather proud of himself as they took their lunch under the mulberry tree. He didn’t say it, nor did it show on his face, but his eyes kept wandering over to the side of the paddy field, where the rice he’d harvested was stacked into a formidable little mountain of gold.

Everyone sat together to eat. Mo Ran ate without pause, and his bowl was clean in no time. Noticing his empty bowl, the auntie was quick to speak up: “Ling-er, go get Xianjun another helping of rice.”

But Mo Ran set down his bowl and chopsticks like he was in a hurry. He flashed a smile and said, “That’s all right, I’m done. I have something to take care of, so I’m gonna run out for a bit. It might take a while, so go ahead and finish eating without me.”

Ling-er was taken by surprise, which turned into unease. “Does Xianjun really eat so little? Is the food not to your taste? If you don’t like it…I could…go make something else for you?”

“No, no, that’s not it. The food’s great.” Of course Mo Ran was completely oblivious to the overtones of the girl’s offer. He brushed

her off with a forthright grin and took off toward the stable with large strides.

"Where are you going?" Chu Wanning asked.

Mo Ran looked back over his shoulder with a smile. "Just a little shopping. I'll be right back."

"Xianjun—"

"It's fine, let him be," Chu Wanning said mildly as he closed his chopsticks around another piece of fried tofu.

Although the two cultivators had arrived together, anyone with eyes could see who had the higher status and who the lower, and whose word counted. Moreover, Chu Wanning's naturally cold and severe features made it difficult for the villagers to press the matter once he'd spoken. They could only let Mo Ran go.

After lunch, everyone split into small groups, some passing the time by chewing tobacco, some napping in the sunshine. The women sat together knitting winter clothes while the children played, riding on bamboo-stick horses. A rail-thin cat sniffed hopefully at the ground, its little pink nose twitching and ears perked, looking for leftovers to eat.

Chu Wanning was resting against a pile of grain with a cup of warm tea when he saw the pitifully skinny cat. He raised a hand to entice it over, thinking to find it something to eat. But the cat was wary of strangers. It thought that Chu Wanning had raised his hand to hit it and fled immediately.

Chu Wanning stared after it mutely. Did he really look so scary? Even cats didn't like him?

As he sulked with cheek in hand, he heard the jingling of copper pieces. Ling-er came over cheerfully, also holding a cup of tea, and sat down beside Chu Wanning.

He turned to look at her with an impassive expression. This girl was very pretty, and on top of that, she wasn't skinny or frail, but the kind of full-figured woman rarely found in such remote and desolate places. She knew how to dress herself, too—she hadn't any money to buy accessories, so she'd gathered some bits of copper and iron, then cleaned them and ground them into smooth rings to string along the hem of her clothing, so that she jingled as she

walked and gleamed under the sun.

"Xianjun," she called, with a voice that was crisp as a ripened berry.

"What is it?" Chu Wanning's voice was cool and clear as drifting mist.

Ling-er was a bit taken aback by his standoffishness. But she quickly put on a smile as if he had been perfectly amicable and said, "Nothing. I just saw you sitting by yourself and thought I'd come over and keep you company."

Chu Wanning eyed her. He knew he didn't have a friendly-looking face; not even the cat wanted to get close to him. Yet people and cats were different, after all—cats had no schemes, but people might have ulterior motives.

Sure enough, after a cascade of chatter full of empty pleasantries and trifling nonsense, Ling-er threw out her real question casually: "Xianjun, what does it take to become…a disciple at Sisheng Peak? Do you think…I have a chance?"

"Give me your hand," said Chu Wanning.

"Ah…" Her eyes widened and she excitedly did as she was told. Chu Wanning pressed the tips of his fingers lightly against the inside of her wrist. After a moment, he drew back. "You do not."

Ling-er's face instantly flushed red. "D-do I not have the aptitude?"

"You knew I was going to check your core as soon as I asked for your hand, so you must've already had someone check for you in the past," Chu Wanning said. "You don't have the aptitude for cultivation, and you will likely be unable to build the foundation for it, even if you spend your whole life trying. It would only be a waste of time were you to go to the peak. I'd suggest forgetting about it."

Ling-er fell silent and her head drooped, crestfallen. A long while passed before she bit her lip and said in a small voice, "Thank you for the advice."

"You're welcome."

She left quietly. Watching her go, Chu Wanning felt a little conflicted. The common folk of the lower cultivation realm hoped

more fervently to join a cultivation sect than those of the upper realm. To the people of the upper cultivation realm, cultivation was a means of bringing honor to one's ancestors and making a name for oneself. But to people of the lower cultivation realm, acceptance into a sect was sometimes a means of survival.

Leaning back against the pile of grain, Chu Wanning took another sip of his tea. The weather really was getting cooler; the tea had gone cold in the few short moments he'd left it alone. He gulped the rest down and closed his eyes, thinking to rest for a bit. But with how poorly he'd slept last night, together with all the strenuous labor of the morning, he ended up falling dead asleep.

When he woke again, the sky was already a deep red, and crows were cawing in the branches. All that was left between the paddy fields were sheaves of rice, neatly arranged, and scattered pieces of grain.

Chu Wanning's eyes snapped wide open in startlement. To think he had slept all the way to sundown, propped against the pile of grain like this. The farmers probably hadn't had the guts to wake him on account of his status.

Not only had they let him sleep the day away, someone had even covered him with an article of clothing so he wouldn't catch cold.

He paused. This clothing… He was about to sit up when he recognized a familiar scent. Coming fully awake, he looked down at the cloth covering him. The fabric was coarse but very clean, with the refreshing scent of the soap beans used in its laundering still clinging to its seams.

It was Mo Ran's clothing.

Upon realizing this, Chu Wanning found himself hastily slumping back down, the muscles in his back relaxing as he hid half his face under the clothing. Only a pair of bright eyes were left showing, slightly narrowed, holding some kind of indescribable and indecipherable emotion within.

He really must have lost his mind.

Squinting, he scanned the paddy fields for the man he sought. It didn't take long—Mo Ran had grown so handsomely tall that he stood out effortlessly wherever he went. From where he sat, Chu

Wanning could see only his back as he helped the villagers load the sheaves of grain onto the ox cart. Mo Ran was probably hot from having worked all day and had stripped out of his outer robe and shirt like the other villagers, leaving his rugged, honey-toned back in full view.

In the searing heat of the sinking sun, sweat slid slowly down the lines of his broad back with every flex of his muscles, trickling to the dimples of his back, snaking beneath the toned line of his waist…

Chu Wanning was like red-hot iron, like a coal in the furnace, taking every tender sentiment and turning it into burning carnal desire. As he studied Mo Ran from a distance, everything else faded out of his consciousness, leaving only that person's gorgeous body, the flex of his muscles as sleek as a panther's, his profile whenever he turned to chat with the village chief with its soft dimple and kind gaze, overflowing with handsome charm.

As if he'd sensed the eyes on his back, Mo Ran turned to look over his shoulder. Chu Wanning hurriedly shut his eyes and pretended to be asleep. But his heart beat so fast it sounded like a rainstorm, and the blood racing through his veins was a low rumble in his ears.

Several seconds passed before he sneakily cracked open one eyelid and peeked out from under his lashes. Mo Ran had already turned back around, and Ling-er was walking up to him with a bashful gaze and a handkerchief in her hand. "Xianjun, here, wipe your sweat."

Mo Ran, whose arms were filled with the rice he was moving onto the cart, smiled and said, "Later, I'm busy right now."

Ling-er seemed more than happy to stay and watch, reaching out now and again to help straighten the pile so it didn't fall. A bit surprised at her eagerness, Mo Ran said, "Thank you."

Thus she grew even more delighted, standing next to this tall, powerful man who practically radiated masculine allure. As she listened to his breathing and looked at his muscular shoulders, she couldn't help the blush that spread across her face. For a moment, she forgot all about things like distance and propriety between men and women. She clutched her handkerchief and said in a soft voice, "Xianjun, it's gonna drip into your eyes if you don't wipe it—"

Mo Ran stayed busy. “I don’t have hands free right now.”

“Then I can wipe it for you…”

She felt a chill at her back before she’d finished speaking.

Without either of them noticing, Chu Wanning had come over to stand behind them, still wearing Mo Ran’s thick black outer robe draped over his shoulders. He looked listless and irritable, like he had just woken up.

“Mo Ran.”

“Yes?” The man who’d been so busy he had no time to even wipe his sweat immediately set down the grain in his arms and rubbed the tip of his nose as he turned, beaming brightly at the sight of Chu Wanning. “Shizun, you’re awake.”

Chu Wanning looked him up and down. “Aren’t you cold?”

Mo Ran smiled. “I’m kind of hot, actually.”

Just then, the droplet of sweat that had been gathering at his dark brow dripped into his eye. He squeezed it shut with an “Aiya,” but the other eye stayed stubbornly open to gaze upon his shizun. Of course he couldn’t just ask a lady for her handkerchief, so he pleaded with Chu Wanning instead. “Shizun, my eye…”

“My handkerchief’s hanging out to dry right now.”

Ling-er hurriedly offered, “You can use mine—”

Paying her no heed, Chu Wanning stepped forward, features impassive even as he leaned forward and tipped his head back to look up. He held the cuff of his snowy white sleeve closed as he raised his arm and used it to carefully wipe the sweat from Mo Ran’s brow.

Chapter 139:
Shizun, Sweet Dreams

MO RAN FROZE. He could smell the familiar fragrance of haitang, and though Chu Wanning wore a straight face, the sleeve on his eyelid was gentle and careful as it wiped.

But more importantly, this white-robed person was standing so close that Mo Ran could see the fine lines in the texture of his lips, so close that all he had to do was dip his head down to kiss those lips, to take those tender petals between his own.

"You may have won, but you didn't wake me up, so it wasn't a fair match." Chu Wanning said as he finished wiping.

Mo Ran blinked, then smiled, "But I didn't win. Shizun won."

"You didn't harvest anything more all afternoon?"

"Nope, and there's not much left either. I went to the market, bought some things for the winter, and made a round through the village. That took up some time," Mo Ran said. "So Shizun reaped more than I did."

Chu Wanning let out a cool *hmph* but seemed satisfied. After a moment, he asked, "What did you buy at the market? Mattresses?"

Before Mo Ran could reply, Ling-er—not wishing to be left out—cut in with a smile, "Xianjun bought so much stuff, I felt bad for the poor horse that had to drag it all back."

"It wasn't that much. Just coal and such, some meat, and some sweets."

"Not only that," Ling-er said, "Xianjun also went and bought a mattress for every family in the village! It was so many that the grandma who fluffs the cotton just up and came back to the village with him with her whole cartful."

Chu Wanning was a bit astonished. "Where did you get the money?"

"I have some savings," Mo Ran said with a smile, "and the mattresses were pretty reasonable, too. Much cheaper than the ones

they sell in the upper cultivation realm."

"What's the meat for?"

"Impulse purchase. I gave it to the village chief to roast and share with everyone tomorrow."

Chu Wanning's face remained carefully neutral as he asked, "And the sweets?"

Ling-er clapped her hands with a giggle. "For the kids in the village, of course. Mo-xianjun gave out the sweets first thing when he got back. There was malt-sugar candy and osmanthus cake. The kids were over the moon; not many of them have had treats like that before." She paused, then said happily, "I got one too."

The girl was sociable and acted familiar with everyone. Chu Wanning hadn't minded the other times she interjected, but this time he shot her a cold glare. "Was it good?"

Ling-er answered freely, "Super good, very sweet."

A sardonic smile tugged at Chu Wanning's lips. "Then help yourself to more," he said indifferently before walking away with a sweep of his sleeves.

Mo Ran didn't know what he'd done to upset him this time. He was about to give chase when something black blotted out his entire field of vision. Chu Wanning had tossed the robe he'd draped across his shoulders at Mo Ran's face. Mo Ran pulled it off and looked anxiously back at him. "Shizun?"

"What are you doing naked like that! I'm freezing just looking at you!" Chu Wanning snapped. "Put on your clothes!"

Mo Ran was rendered speechless. He truly was quite warm, but he quickly and silently pulled the robe on anyway since Chu Wanning had said so. The fabric was instantly soaked with sweat and stuck uncomfortably to his skin. At a loss, he gazed at his shizun through downcast lashes.

Chu Wanning lowered his sharp brows. "Fix your collar! Don't just leave it open for the world to see! Indecent!"

Mutely, Mo Ran pulled his lapels closed, folding them tight and high so that not a sliver of skin was left exposed. Yet all that did was impart him with a kind of untouchable allure instead. For some reason the sight of it made Chu Wanning even angrier; he

cursed under his breath and walked away with a flick of his sleeves, leaving Mo Ran to stare blankly after him like a dumb dog.

The village chief, his wife, and Ling-er were all flummoxed as they watched this exchange. Ling-er said, somewhat disconcerted, "This xianjun sure is scary… I've never seen such a strange-tempered person before…" She spoke quietly in sympathetic, fawning tones, turning her head as she muttered, "Your master is so mean to you… You're really patient, putting up with all th—"

The words died on her lips as her eyes met Mo Ran's. That usually smiling and easygoing Mo-xianjun wore a dark expression, and there was a terrifying, wolf-like ferociousness in his eyes. Her mouth snapped shut, and Mo Ran turned his face away, somewhat obscuring his features. Ling-er could feel her heart race. She was unsure if it was merely her imagination, or if this person who was usually so calm and serene, like a sturdy mountain, really had revealed a starkly different face of savagery for an instant.

"Sorry," Mo Ran mumbled, "you guys go ahead first. I'm going to go check on him." He set off with broad strides.

Mo Ran found Chu Wanning by the bank of the river, where reeds danced along the shore and the setting sun sank into rippling waters. Mo Ran came to a stop behind him, a little short of breath from how fast he had run. "Shizun."

No reply.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"No."

"Then why are you so displeased?"

"I'm plenty pleased."

Mo Ran blinked. "Huh?"

Turning to look over his shoulder, Chu Wanning said grouchily, "I'll be as displeased as I please."

Mo Ran didn't want to play word games with Chu Wanning. He studied his expression instead, then smiled as realization dawned. "I know why Shizun is upset."

Chu Wanning's hands balled into fists within his billowing sleeves, and though he maintained a calm expression, his shoulders

tightened almost imperceptibly. “I already said I’m not—”

But Mo Ran had walked over to stand under the tree with him, grinning with a hand behind his back. The old banyan tree at the riverbank had thick roots protruding aboveground, like hardy veins that burrowed deep into the earth. Standing on one of these roots, Mo Ran looked even taller than he already was.

Alarmed and a touch annoyed, Chu Wanning said, “Get down here.”

“All righty.”

Mo Ran hopped lightly down and landed in front of Chu Wanning. The tree was so massive and sprawling that there was very little space not occupied by its roots. Chu Wanning stood in one such spot, and Mo Ran had little other ground to stand on besides the patch right next to him. As he waited with his head lowered, Mo Ran’s breaths were practically caressing Chu Wanning’s lashes. Chu Wanning was so uncomfortable he ended up demanding with a gloomy expression, “Go stand up there again.”

Mo Ran couldn’t help but grin. “Up and down and up and down; is Shizun toying with me?”

Chu Wanning knew he was being unreasonable in his irritation. Thus exposed, he simply refused to reply, remaining grimly silent.

Mo Ran revealed the hand he’d hidden behind his back. It held a surprise cargo of candy: a colorful little pile of rice-paper-wrapped sweetness cupped in his palm. “Don’t be mad; I saved some for you.”

Chu Wanning only grew more silently furious. He was so mad he could spit blood, flames of rage burning high into the heavens. Swordlike brows drawn low in anger, he eventually bellowed, *“Mo Weiyu!”*

Mo Ran hurriedly snapped to attention. “Present!”

“Who wants your stupid candy? What am I, a three-year-old? Some village maiden? I don’t wan—*mmf!*”

A piece of candy had been stuffed into his mouth.

Chu Wanning froze in shock. His face flushed bright red all the way to the tips of his ears—whether in anger or embarrassment was

anyone's guess—and his phoenix eyes were as wide as they could go as he glared at the grinning man before him with a mixture of shock and fury.

"It's milk-flavored," Mo Ran said. "Your favorite."

Chu Wanning found himself a little speechless and a little powerless—like a cat with its claws clipped, hissing and bristling yet completely harmless.

He savored the milk candy. A small strand of hair by his temple, loosened when he'd stomped off earlier, fluttered softly like a tender leaf in the breeze. Staring at it, Mo Ran had the irresistible urge to reach out and tuck it back in.

Mo Ran was a man of action. He thought, so he did.

Chu Wanning's speechlessness intensified.

"I got some candies and pastries for everyone in the village," Mo Ran said with a smile, "but I tucked the best candies in my sleeve for Shizun, and I left the best pastries in your room. I got you lotus crisps, really pretty ones—eat them in secret when you get back; don't let the little ones see or they'll want some too."

Chu Wanning said nothing, standing in the field of reeds beneath that banyan tree. A long moment passed before he rolled the melting milk candy on his tongue and gazed up at the person standing before him. Finally, he tossed out the words, "Honey-glazed lotus root."

Mo Ran grinned. "Yup."

"Stewed crab meatballs."

"A-yup."

Chu Wanning silently turned his head away. He felt like he had discarded a little too much of his dignity today, and he should pick it back up and dust it off. So he pointedly straightened his spine and lifted his chin slightly as he said, "Too bad there isn't any pear blossom white wine."

He must have thought he looked very stern and imposing that way. And it might have had such an effect in the past, when Mo Ran had been younger and shorter than him. Little did he know that this posture now served only to give Mo Ran a better view of his gently sloping jawline, his exposed throat, and his porcelain-fair neck. He

was like an arrogant cat flaunting its softest spot in front of a wolf's fangs, conceited and oblivious, thinking it was intimidating the wolf when in truth the wolf wanted nothing more than to take the cat's throat between his jaws, to lick and to kiss, to eat him whole.

What a dummy.

It took an enormous amount of willpower for Mo Ran to tear his gaze from the underside of Chu Wanning's jaw. But his eyes were a little darker and his voice a bit deeper as he looked at the person in front of him. He forced himself to smile, conducted himself the way a man of integrity would, and said, "I got that too."

Chu Wanning didn't quite follow at first and asked with furrowed brow, "What?"

"Pear blossom white." Keeping his expression carefully steady, Mo Ran exhaled quietly as he squashed that burning desire inside of himself. His voice came out a little rough. "I got pear blossom white, too."

Chu Wanning stared in silence.

"It occurred to me on the way back that Shizun might want it," Mo Ran explained. "Good thing I picked some up."

Chu Wanning glared at this disciple who had pulled out all the stops to please him and found himself at a loss for words. Perhaps, he suddenly thought, there was really no point to being so difficult, no point to this veneer of coldness. He finally relaxed by degrees, leaning against the old banyan tree as he studied the young man before him. "Mo Ran."

"Hm?"

"You've changed."

For a split second, he thought he caught a hint of unease in the depths of Mo Ran's eyes. But then Mo Ran's thick eyelashes fluttered, and he asked, "Does Shizun like it?"

Chu Wanning eyed him for a long moment. "I don't dislike it." Then, as if remembering something, he straightened up and raised a hand that hesitated midair for a beat before coming to rest on Mo Ran's side.

Mo Ran flinched, looking down at Chu Wanning in apprehensive confusion.

“I read about your battle with the Drought Demon of Yellow River,” Chu Wanning said. “Is this where you were injured?”

A long pause, then: “Mn.”

Chu Wanning sighed softly and clapped Mo Ran on the shoulder. “You’ve done well. The title of Mo-zongshi is well deserved.”

“This disciple wouldn’t presume.”

A small smile tugged at Chu Wanning’s lips, and he poked Mo Ran between the brows with that same hand. “Then again, running around half-naked all day is indeed no way for a zongshi to behave. It’s getting late. Let’s head back and turn in for the night. What’s the plan for tomorrow?”

Mo Ran thought for a second before saying, “I think there was something about cooking the rice to make rice cakes.”

Chu Wanning nodded. He suddenly said, “Don’t just randomly take off your clothes anymore.”

Mo Ran’s face went red. “Got it.”

“Take a break if you’re hot from working.”

“Okay.”

Chu Wanning mulled it over for a bit, then added, “Remember to bring your own handkerchief, and don’t dally around with unmarried girls. Do you have a handkerchief?”

Feeling a little self-conscious, Mo Ran replied, “Nope.”

“Then…what do you use to wipe your face…”

Feeling even more abashed over his own crudeness, Mo Ran hesitated before eventually saying, “My sleeves…”

Chu Wanning stared at him for a moment. “I’ll make you one sometime.”

Mo Ran’s eyes brightened. “For me?”

“Mn.”

Mo Ran was ecstatic. “I can’t wait! When is Shizun going to make it?”

Chu Wanning’s brows drew together slightly. “After we’re done here, at the very least.”

“Then…I want one with haitang flowers too. Is that okay?”

Chu Wanning eyed him, then said, “I’ll see what I can do.”

Overcome with joy over the promised handkerchief he’d earned in exchange for a handful of candy, Mo Ran floated on cloud nine all night, rolling around in his new-bought quilt, too happy to sleep. He had spent these last five years in a fog of agonizing misery—this was the first time he couldn’t sleep because of joy instead. His heart kept racing and wouldn’t calm down.

In the end, he gave in and sat up. His window was right across from Chu Wanning’s. He opened it a crack and leaned on the sill, taking in the refreshing scent of night in the countryside as he gazed into the small courtyard and at the candlelight across the way.

Chu Wanning was still up. What was he doing? Was he considering designs for the handkerchief, or was he eating the lotus crisp?

Mo Ran watched that warm yellow light in the room across from his for a long, long time—all the way until the light was snuffed out and Chu Wanning went to bed, before wistfully murmuring: “Shizun, sweet dreams.”

And something else kept tucked away deep inside, something he dared not speak aloud even if no one would hear:

Wanning. Sweet dreams.

Chapter 140:
Shizun, Turn Over

THANKS TO Mo Ran's well wishes, Chu Wanning did indeed dream that night. Unfortunately, it wasn't the sweet kind.

In his dream, he was back at Butterfly Town during the Heavenly Rift; however, the person mending the great tear in the sky with him wasn't Mo Ran, but Shi Mei.

Working amidst heavy snow falling from an ashen sky, Shi Mei couldn't hold out. A horde of ghosts stabbed him through the heart, and he fell from the coiled dragon pillar to the endless snowy ground below. Mo Ran rushed over to gather the bleeding Shi Mei into his arms. He knelt at Chu Wanning's feet and begged him to help, to save his own disciple. Chu Wanning wanted to save him too. But under the effect of the twinned barrier, he had suffered the same grave injury as Shi Mei. Face drained of all color, he stood there wordlessly for fear that blood would come spilling out were he to part his lips, and that the teeming ghosts would rush them at once to tear them to pieces.

"Shizun…please…I'm begging you…"

Mo Ran was weeping and kowtowing to him, over and over.

Chu Wanning closed his eyes and fled…

Shi Mei died. Mo Ran never forgave him.

He dreamt of Naihe Bridge at Sisheng Peak during a cold spell in late spring. It was raining, drops clinging to the tender beginnings of flowers and leaves on the trees, and the bluestone path beneath his feet seemed endless as he walked its length, holding an umbrella.

In the distance, across the bridge, he saw another figure walking toward him, dressed in black with no umbrella, holding a stack of books wrapped in oilpaper. Chu Wanning unconsciously slowed his pace.

That person had clearly noticed him as well, but his steps didn't slow. He only lifted those rain-laden lashes to cast him a

single cold glance.

Chu Wanning wanted to call out to him, wanted to say: *Mo…*

But Mo Ran didn't allow him the chance to speak. Clutching his books, he walked as far to the left as he could without falling into the river—in order to get as far away as he could from his shizun on the right.

They met in the middle of the bridge. One who usually used an umbrella, walking in the rain, and one who never had the habit of using one, also in the rain.

They passed each other by.

The one enduring the rain kept walking without so much as a backward glance, but the one under the shelter of the umbrella stopped, standing rooted in place. Rain pattered against the oiled paper. Chu Wanning stood there for a long time, so long his legs began to go numb, as if the damp cold of the Sichuan air had sunk into his very bones. He suddenly felt an exhaustion so crushing he couldn't take another step.

The dream was swallowed by black.

It was cold and heavy. Cold like the rain, heavy like legs that refused to move. Chu Wanning turned over in his sleep and curled into a tiny ball. Wetness slid from the corner of his eye and soaked into the pillow. He vaguely knew that it was only a dream.
But why, then, was it so realistic, so much so that he could clearly feel Mo Ran's hatred, his disappointment, his spurn?

Was that it? Was that how it ended?

He refused to accept it; perhaps it was this refusal that made the dreamscape light up again.

He was back in that same dream, many months after Shi Mei's passing. Mo Ran's temperament grew gloomier by the day, and he spoke less and less. He still came to his cultivation lessons, but only to sit in and listen, and he never spoke a word more to Chu Wanning than he had to. Chu Wanning had never explained why he hadn't saved Shi Mingjing back then. Seeing Mo Ran's attitude, he knew nothing he said would change things now that they had come to this point.

One day, during a cultivation lesson, Mo Ran stood at the tip

of a pine tree as instructed, working on concentrating spiritual energy. But for some reason, he collapsed without warning and plummeted right off the tree. Chu Wanning flew up to catch him without a thought. But he didn't have time to cast anything, and the two fell heavily to the ground below.

Luckily the soil was soft and covered with a thick layer of pine needles. Neither of them was much injured, save for Chu Wanning's wrist, which had been slashed open by a sharp branch and was seeping blood.

Mo Ran looked at the wound, and then, for the first time in months, lifted his eyes to look directly at Chu Wanning's face. He said, eventually, "Shizun, you're bleeding." His tone was a little stiff, but at least the words were pacifying. "There're salve and bandages in my qiankun pouch. Best to take care of it straight away."

They sat on the thick cushion of needles, the refreshing scent of pine drifting in the air. Chu Wanning said nothing as he watched Mo Ran wordlessly wrap the bandage around his wrist with his head bowed. Though he couldn't see the expression on Mo Ran's face, he could see the minute quivering of his lashes. For a moment, he wished he could gather up the courage to ask:

Mo Ran, do you really hate me that much?

But the breeze was so gentle, the sunlight so warm; birds and bugs chirped between the branches, and his injured hand was held lightly between Mo Ran's as he wrapped the bandage. Everything was so quiet and peaceful.

In the end, he didn't ask, didn't shatter the picture of serenity. He suddenly felt like the answer wasn't that important anyway. What was important in this dream after Shi Mei's death was that his blood, his injury, could buy back just a wisp of Mo Ran's rationality, could ease the tension between them just a touch.

Chu Wanning woke up dazed the next day. Lying in bed, he could still feel the lingering warmth and the ache in his wrist. Some minutes passed before he rubbed his face in exhaustion. Ridiculous. What was that nonsense in his dream?

It was said that dreams were a manifestation of one's private

thoughts. Could it be that he was so miffed by how beautiful Shi Mei had grown that he had to vent these emotions in a dream about Shi Mei's death?

How absurd.

He rose from his bed and got ready for the day: washing, dressing, and putting up his hair. Soon enough, he'd forgotten all about the night's fragmented visions.

The villagers were making rice cakes.

In the lower cultivation realm, rice cakes were an absolute must for New Year's Eve, believed to bring good fortune in the next year. Both short-grain, non-glutinous rice and glutinous rice that had been ground into flour the night before were steamed by the women and elderly over hot stoves. It was a laborious process, but didn't require the aid of younger menfolk, so Chu Wanning slept in a little and took his time strolling over.

When he arrived, he saw a giant wok propped over a fire in an open field with a wooden barrel half as tall as a man set over it, billowing with hot steam. The village chief's wife stood on a footstool, adding rice flour to the barrel every now and again. A couple of kids ran around the wok, playing and occasionally pulling a fistful of roasted peanuts or a corncob from the firepit using metal tongs.

What Chu Wanning hadn't expected was that Mo Ran had gotten up early as usual and was helping the village chief's wife tend to the stove.

One of the kids, running a bit too fast, tripped, sniffled, and burst into tears. Mo Ran helped her up and patted the dust off her clothes, asking, "Oh no, you tripped? Are you hurt anywhere?"

"My hand—" The little girl, still bawling, lifted her dirty little palm to show Mo Ran.

Mo Ran scooped her up, walked over to the well, and drew a bucket of clean water to wash her hand with. From a distance, Chu Wanning couldn't hear what he said to the child, but the little girl choked back her tears, sniffled for a while, then stopped crying. In due time, she smiled, then looked up at Mo Ran with snot smeared on her little face and began chattering away at him. Chu Wanning watched quietly from behind a corner as he coaxed the little girl.

Watched as he carried her back to the firepit, watched as he retrieved a sweet potato from the fire, peeled it, and put it in the little girl's hands. He watched it all from where he stood, as if seeing the last five years of Mo Weiyu's life.

"Ah, Shizun is here?"

"Mn." After a long moment, Chu Wanning walked over to sit down beside Mo Ran. He watched the roaring flames lick the underside of the wok for a spell, then asked, "What's in there?"

"Peanuts, sweet potatoes, corn," Mo Ran answered, "and now that you're here, a piece of candy for you."

"Candy can be roasted?"

"It'll be burnt candy if Shizun does it, though," Mo Ran teased with a smile. "Let me."

So saying, he produced a piece of milk candy from his pocket and removed the rice paper wrapping. He clasped it in the fire tongs and held it in the flames for a few brief seconds before pulling it back out and taking the candy. He sucked in a breath and said, "It's hot," then blew on the sweet to cool it before holding it to Chu Wanning's lips. "Try it."

Chu Wanning wasn't used to eating out of someone else's hand, so he reached out and took the candy himself. The creamy-white candy was warm and soft from the fire, bringing out the sweet, milky flavor as he chewed. Chu Wanning said, "Not bad. Roast another."

So Mo Ran roasted another, and Chu Wanning took it to eat as before.

"Another."

Mo Ran obligingly roasted eight candies in a row. As he was roasting the ninth, a little kid ran over to ask him for a sweet potato. Mo Ran didn't have a hand free and had to ask Chu Wanning to do it instead.

Chu Wanning took the other pair of fire tongs and picked out the biggest one. Mo Ran looked over and said, "Put that one back, get the small one next to it."

"The bigger ones are tastier."

“The bigger ones aren’t cooked through yet,” Mo Ran said with a smile.

Chu Wanning was unconvinced. “How do you know it’s not cooked?”

“Just trust me. I roast sweet potatoes in the wild all the time. Give him the small one, those are sweeter.”

So Chu Wanning retrieved the small one instead. The little kid had no idea what a big name Chu Wanning was in the cultivation world; he only knew that he was willing to help him pick sweet potatoes. He sidled over and said in a small voice, “Da-gege, I want the big one.”

“Tell that to the other da-gege,” Chu Wanning said. “He’s the one who won’t let you have it. He says it’s not cooked yet.”

The little guy really did run right over to Mo Ran. “Mo Ran-gege, I want the big one.”

“You’ll have to wait a while longer if you want the big one,” Mo Ran said.

“How long is a while?”

“Count to a hundred.”

“But I can only count to ten…” the kid moaned.

Mo Ran grinned. “Guess you’ll have to eat the small one, then.”

The little guy sighed dramatically but could do nothing but accept this injustice. His head drooped and he muttered, “Fine, the small one then.”

Chu Wanning set about peeling the sweet potato for him. He was almost done when the candy Mo Ran was roasting got to its softest point; any more and it would melt. Mo Ran hastily pulled it out and offered it to Chu Wanning. “Shizun, open your mouth—”

Hands full of sweet potato, Chu Wanning opened his mouth without a second thought; it wasn’t until Mo Ran had popped the warm, soft milk candy onto his tongue, the coarse pad of his thumb brushing lightly past the corner of his lips, that Chu Wanning abruptly realized that he had eaten a sweet right out of his own disciple’s hand. The tips of his ears grew bright red.

“More?”

Chu Wanning cleared his throat, but luckily the color on his face was camouflaged by the warm glow of the fire. “I’m good.”

Mo Ran smiled. “Just enough to fill you up; there’s only one piece of milk candy left and no more, even if you wanted it.”

Relaxed and at ease, he had spoken carelessly and thoughtlessly, uttering without a thought a phrase like “fill you up.” Such words were completely inappropriate from a disciple to his shizun; words that smacked of pampering and domineering, like an owner feeding his pet, an emperor satisfying his concubine, words that could be applied to matters between the sheets, the conqueror above using his scorching hot body to fill up the moaning person beneath. Chu Wanning was dazed for a solid minute, drowning in those crude words.

When the rice was done steaming, the next step required hard physical labor: all the young men in the village used wooden mallets to pound the rice cakes. The village chief handed Mo Ran a wooden mallet wrapped in gauze and was about to give Chu Wanning one as well when Mo Ran held out a hand to stop him. He smiled. “Village Chief, my shizun has never done this before. He wouldn’t be any good at it.”

Chu Wanning was speechless. He was quite affronted, a little indignant even. From the day he’d left the temple, he’d never been anything but competent and reliable. All he ever heard from others were requests and pleas, things like *Xianjun, please help with this and that.* This was the first time someone had ever stepped before him and said, *He doesn’t know how, he wouldn’t be any good at it.*

Chu Wanning was irritated. He wanted to fling his sleeves and thunder, *Who are you calling no good!* But he held himself back. Mo Ran wasn’t wrong… He really wouldn’t be any good at it.

The village chief pointed them toward a stone mortar with a ball of steaming cooked rice flour inside. Mo Ran said, “Shizun, when we get started, turn the rice cake over every three strikes. Be careful not to burn your hands, and don’t do it too fast; I don’t want to accidentally hit you.”

“If you manage to hit me pounding rice cakes, you may as well quit cultivating and go be a farmer instead.”

Mo Ran grinned. “I’m just saying. Just in case.”

Chu Wanning wasn’t about to waste any more breath on him—not least because the pair next to them had already gotten started, and he didn’t want to be outdone. He stood beside the stone mortar and said, “Get to it.”

Mo Ran swung the mallet. The very first strike landed heavy and solid, sinking into the softly steaming rice flour. He swung two more times, then looked up at Chu Wanning with bright eyes and said, “Shizun, turn over.”

Chu Wanning turned the ball of rice flour over, and Mo Ran continued pounding. It took only a few rounds for them to find the rhythm: every third time Mo Ran lifted the mallet, Chu Wanning would nimbly turn the rice flour ball over, and the strike would come down just as his hands withdrew. Rice cake pounding might have looked simple, but it had to be carefully controlled, and the person doing the pounding had to have strength and stamina both. It took countless rounds of turning and pounding to make the rice flour sticky and stretchy enough to call the job done.

After a while, Mo Ran was still swinging his mallet with ease, but the villagers next to him were flagging. They started shouting, “One, two, three—one, two, three—” to the rhythm of the pounding. Intrigued, Mo Ran followed along. By the time the rice flour balls were half-sticky, everyone else was heaving with exhaustion, but Mo Ran was unfussed, smiling as he said to Chu Wanning, “Again.”

Chu Wanning glanced at him. The young man’s brow was covered in sweat, making his honey-brown skin sparkle under the sunlight. His lips were slightly parted; he wasn’t panting like the others, but his breathing was a little heavier, the rise and fall of his chest a little more pronounced.

Conscious of Chu Wanning’s eyes on him, he paused before wiping his face with his sleeve, eyes bright like stars as he smiled. “What is it? Did I get flour on my face?”

“No.”

“Then…”

When Chu Wanning saw how hot and sweaty he was, and how he persisted in keeping his lapels properly folded all the way to his

throat, Chu Wanning unexpectedly felt a little sorry for him. He asked, “Are you hot?”

Yesterday he had asked Mo Ran if he was cold, and today was asking if he was hot. Mo Ran was confused: the temperature had been pretty much the same both days. He stared blankly for a beat before answering, “I’m all right.”

“Take that off if you’re hot.”

“Shizun doesn’t like it, so I won’t.”

A long pause. “I like it even less when you’re all sweaty.”

Since Chu Wanning had said so, and the clothes were indeed uncomfortably sticky, Mo Ran went ahead and removed his outer robe and inner shirt, tossing them aside on the millstone.
Chu Wanning’s gaze was icy, when in truth his heart was growing warmer and warmer. He stared at Mo Ran standing beside the millstone, at his broad shoulders and back and those firmly toned arms, and could practically feel the rush of warm air as Mo Ran pulled off his inner shirt.

Mo Ran really was sweaty all over, his skin covered in a glossy sheen under the sunlight. Like a merman emerging from the water, he turned and smiled at Chu Wanning, looking dizzyingly, heart-racingly handsome.

The village chief’s wife was going around, offering everyone tea. When she reached them, she asked, “Would you like a cup?”

Mo Ran strode back over to the mortar and picked up the mallet again as he replied with a smile, “I’m not thirsty, but thank you.”

A hand reached over and took a cup of tea from the tray. As Mo Ran and the village chief’s wife both watched in awe, Chu Wanning gulped down the entire cup in one go before returning it empty. “One more, please.”

“Shizun…are you that thirsty?”

Somehow pricked by the question, Chu Wanning’s head snapped up, eyes bright and tone cagey as he said, “Thirsty? No? I’m not thirsty at all.”

Then he gulped down another whole cup.

Watching him, Mo Ran was baffled—when had Shizun's pride gotten so out of hand that he couldn't even admit to being thirsty?

Chapter 141:
Shizun, Don't Strip!

THE TWO OF THEM got back to work after their tea, but Chu Wanning knew he was in for it as soon as Mo Ran lifted the mallet. The vigorous motion made the lines of the young man's body look all the more taut and defined. The sun's golden rays poured over his skin like a waterfall, sliding over his sensual, chiseled muscles. He lifted his arms, and his already wide shoulders appeared even broader. The muscles of his smooth chest were like sunbaked rocks, firm and solid, harboring an intense heat and strength.

The wooden mallet slammed into the mortar, sank deep inside the moist softness of the rice cake, and trailed a sticky white as it lifted again. It was one swing after another with that immense, inexhaustible strength. Chu Wanning thought that if he were really accidentally hit by Mo Ran's strike, as he had warned, he just might be crushed under him, shattered into pieces.

Mo Ran concentrated as he worked, his breath coming heavier now, chest rising and falling to the beat of his heart. Sweat clung to his brows and the jut of his throat bobbed slightly every now and again. The muscles in his arms flexed with each swing. Watching him, Chu Wanning suddenly couldn't help but recall that dream he used to have over and over. In it, he had lain on Mo Ran's bed, being thrust into like the rice cake in the mortar, being kneaded and humiliated until his body went soft…

He stared off into space until he heard Mo Ran calling him.

"Shizun."

Or maybe Mo Ran had called him several times already.

"Shizun. Shizun?"

Chu Wanning snapped out of it, but his heart raced madly in his chest and a faint light wavered in the depths of his eyes. His throat bobbed, and his eyes were a little unfocused as he responded, "Hm?"

Mo Ran's clear gaze was fixed on him from above. The heat of

his body made his eyes seem even more fiery than usual. He said, “Shizun, turn over.”

Chu Wanning was miles away, lost in that gaze, in those words. He felt dreams and reality folding into one another, becoming as one. He suddenly felt dizzy, scarlet red flashing before his eyes. He saw two people tumbling in red bedding embroidered in gold with a dragon and phoenix, a well-built man on top of another, tumultuous waves of red in an ocean of desires, the toes of the man beneath tightly curled, his calves twitching.

“Shizun, turn over…”

He could practically feel that man’s hot breaths against the back of his ear.

“Let me see your face while I fuck you.”

Shocked by the images that had risen in his mind unbidden, Chu Wanning squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head—what *was* that? A hallucination? Or an overly vivid recollection of *that* dream? Heart thudding, he could feel the slide of cold sweat over his skin even as hot blood raced through his veins.

Sensing something amiss, Mo Ran put down the wooden mallet and came to his side. “Shizun, what’s wrong? Are you feeling okay?”

“I’m fine.” Even Mo Ran’s voice made Chu Wanning’s heart tingle like it was being nibbled by insects. Chu Wanning shoved him forcefully away, hating the way his own mind had betrayed him. He raised his eyes in a furious glare, the corners of those phoenix eyes tinged the faintest of reds from humiliation, breath coming heavy. “The sun is too hot. I was just feeling a little dizzy. Don’t stand so close to me; you’re all sweaty.”

Mo Ran glanced down and at himself saw that he was indeed quite sweaty. Well aware that Chu Wanning was a stickler for cleanliness, he immediately stepped away and reproached himself. But his concerned gaze remained fixed on Chu Wanning, unwilling to look away for even a second.

Chu Wanning kept to himself after that. By the time the rice cakes were steamed, and everyone gathered to sit and eat, he was nowhere to be found.

“Oh, Chu-xianjun? He said he had a bit of a headache, so he went back to rest in the cabin,” the village chief said. “His cheeks *did* look a little flushed. I hope he isn’t running a fever.”

The moment Mo Ran heard this, he grew anxious. He left off helping them store the rice cakes and instead dashed back to the small courtyard where the two were staying.

Opening the door revealed only an empty bed, and he grew more anxious still. He heard the sudden sound of water sloshing from the kitchen and raced over, shoving the curtain aside—only to see Chu Wanning completely naked and standing barefoot on the red clay floor, in the middle of dunking a bucket of water over himself.

It was the end of October, well into autumn…was Chu Wanning fucking serious, washing himself with cold water?! Mo Ran was completely dumbfounded, his face shifting between blue, then white, then red as he stared at his naked shizun. He felt like he could hear nothing but the rumble of his blood flowing, like the surging tides of the Qiantang River. He couldn’t believe his eyes…

This was the first time since his rebirth that he was seeing Chu Wanning’s body in its entirety, perfectly vivid and perfectly clear. No haze, no concealment, nothing. There was only a familiar physique, this body that tore down his defenses and slammed open the floodgates of his memories. He felt like all the blood in his body was boiling, surging like lava, trying to break free of his skin and flesh.

Chu Wanning’s body was exactly as he remembered. He suddenly found that he couldn’t breathe. He could see the perfect curve of Chu Wanning’s shoulders, the lean strength in those lines like that of a bow pulled taut, tension ready to be unleashed. He could see Chu Wanning’s shoulder blades, moving beneath skin as delicate and exquisite as thin ice. His gaze traveled down with the streams of water—oh yes, it followed those rivulets as if they were carrying his gaze down, down, down to Chu Wanning’s slender waist, to the dip of his back where two dimples lay. The water pooled within those dimples like an intoxicating liquor, promising to poison any who tried to slake their thirst on him.

Even further down, and there were those pert, shapely

buttocks, like autumn-ripe fruit, plump and sweet. Mo Ran knew too well the exquisite ecstasy that would come from touching that fruit, knew the shuddering pleasure that came from joining with it, so intense it felt like his very soul might shatter and meld into the person beneath him. A heady, addicting flavor that drew him back, time and again.

"Mo-xianjun!" All of a sudden, someone was calling for him. "Mo-xianjun, are you there?"

Startled, Mo Ran turned, but the door curtain was whipped aside before he could stop it. Ling-er came through it, saying, "Why did you run off in such a hurry? My mom sent me to fetch you. We're about to eat the sweet rice cakes, do you—" She caught sight of the bathing Chu Wanning, and her voice died in her throat.

Chu Wanning was frozen, speechless. Ling-er was also frozen, equally speechless, until—

"Ahhh!" The girl screamed, covering her eyes in a panic.

Chu Wanning's expression was dark as could be as he scrambled for his clothing, uncharacteristically fumbling. When he'd first fled back to his room to cool off, there was no way he expected not one, but *two* uninvited guests to barge in on him. What the *actual* hell! He'd stripped as he entered the kitchen and dropped his clothing right by the door; he'd always been casual about these things. Was he now supposed to make his way across the length of the kitchen, stark naked, right in front of a young lady, to fetch his clothes?

As he stood caught in this dilemma, Mo Ran strode over and pressed his hands against the wall on either side of Chu Wanning, blocking him from view in a mock-embrace. He turned and said to Ling-er, "Get out."

"Ah! Right! Yes!" The girl broke from her momentary stun and stumbled out in a hurry, running far away in shock.

Chu Wanning remained completely silent.

Mo Ran's face was gloomy. Only after he made sure the girl was really gone did he sigh in relief and turn his gaze back—only to meet with Chu Wanning's cold expression.

He realized at once that his actions were very much like a ferocious hound protecting his food, baring his teeth to scare off intruders before turning back around, whimpering, to lick and eat the hard-won prize. His arms were still braced against the wall. In order to keep Chu Wanning firmly shielded, he had pressed very close, close enough that he could pick up Chu Wanning's scent, and he froze unconsciously…

His head was burning, dizzy and heavy.

Smell was the sense with the greatest power to evoke memories and desires. The aroma of meat would make one hungry, smelling plum blossoms would make one think of winter snow, and so on and so forth. Lust was no exception. Mo Ran felt his mind surge, and the wall of determination he had so painstakingly erected seemed to crumble right there. Chu Wanning's scent was a spark that landed in Mo Ran's hot and dry chest, igniting his animal instincts, ready to burn him to ash.

In their daily life, Mo Ran's heart would flutter despite himself any time he got close to Chu Wanning, regardless of how covered up and properly dressed he was. And now that person was before him, stark naked…

He desperately wanted to seize Chu Wanning's icy cold wrists, still dripping with water, wanted to twist Chu Wanning around and push him against the wall while ripping his own clothes off, wanted to press his chest firmly against that man's back, wrap his arms around him, hold him down as he drove brutally into him. Just as he had in the previous life when he had held absolute power over this person, had indulged liberally in the sweet allure of shuddering breaths and sweat-slick bodies.

He really couldn't take it anymore… He wanted him so badly.

Mo Ran's breathing abruptly turned heavy. He didn't speak, and neither did Chu Wanning make a sound. The two stood pressed against the wall, so close they would be touching if not for Mo Ran's

arms bracing himself, muscles taut and trembling as he endured.

Do not touch him. Do not touch him.

Respect him. Cherish him.

Do not repeat those immoral absurdities. Do not.

He told himself this again and again, mechanically repeating it in his mind. The weather was cold, but a thin sheen of sweat slowly began to form on his forehead.

You can't… You can't… Mo Ran, you can't… Don't let your mind wander…

He gulped and closed his eyes with a shudder, blocking out that scalding gaze, but there was already a dazed expression on his face…

Normally, Chu Wanning would have sensed that something was strange. But right now, he wasn't much better off than Mo Ran. Possibly worse. He might have looked calm and collected, but it took all his formidable willpower to keep this pretense alive.

Mo Ran's breaths were so hot and heavy, carrying with them an intense, masculine scent that threatened to scorch him. And the arms pressed against the wall were so powerful. Though he and Mo Ran had yet to spar since his return from the dead, Chu Wanning knew full well that in a match of physical strength, discounting spiritual power, those arms would completely dominate him, crush him into dust.

Unwilling to meet Mo Ran's eyes, he lowered his gaze to Mo Ran's chest.

Though they weren't pressed together, Mo Ran was standing so close that you could barely run a thread between them. Chu Wanning could distinctly feel the raw, masculine tension radiating from that warm chest, engulfing him in its blaze. That heat could melt the coldest glacier in the world and turn it into an uncontrollably overflowing spring.

"Shizun…" he heard the young man say all of a sudden. He couldn't tell if it was his imagination, but he felt Mo Ran's voice sounded a little rough, filled with a steamy, heated lust. Mo Ran had called him *Shizun* many times before; calmly, respectfully, furiously, jokingly… But this was the first time Chu Wanning had

ever heard *Shizun* said like this: nursed between his lips and teeth, ground together with raw lust, almost filthy, yet deeply alluring. It was enough to make Chu Wanning feel like his very bones were going numb.

Impossible. Mo Ran would never address him like that. He'd heard wrongly, he was overthinking it. It was his heart that was filthy.

He instinctively backed away. His naked back hit the ice-cold wall, eliciting an involuntary shudder, and his quivering lips parted slightly, so that he looked almost helpless, vulnerable.

Mo Ran's pupils darkened even further. He stared at those pale, dewy lips. Though he made no move, his imagination ran wild. He thought about lowering his head to press his lips to Chu Wanning's, prying them apart and brutally violating this virginal forbidden territory with his burning tongue. He thought about what it would be like to take Chu Wanning's waist in his hands, to hold him so bruisingly tight that he would leave marks on Chu Wanning's skin.

No matter how he repressed himself, the blood of a wolf still surged in Mo Ran's veins. His natural instincts would always be scorching hot and violently ruthless; he would always tear the person he took to bed into shreds, devouring them whole from the inside out, lapping up every last drop of blood, every last morsel of flesh.

He could never become tame.

He closed his eyes as he suppressed the boiling lava in his chest. This was dangerous. He knew full well how men's desire, once awoken, made them little better than beasts. He knew that he needed to chase this oblivious rabbit away while he still had self-control left. He withdrew his hands and said, voice hoarse, "Shizun, I'll…go get your clothes."

Thick and heavy breaths brushed against Chu Wanning's lashes.

Mo Ran turned and walked toward the door in long strides to pick up Chu Wanning's discarded robes.

Chu Wanning was still leaning against the wall. He felt completely drained, as if he had just run a hundred miles and

couldn't catch his breath. He narrowed his phoenix eyes a little, and saw that Mo Ran had his back to him, gathering the clothes he'd tossed aside as he'd stripped. Suddenly, Chu Wanning remembered the state of a certain body part and froze for a few long moments. His mind started racing.

When Mo Ran had come in earlier, Chu Wanning had been sluicing himself off with his back to the door. When Chu Wanning had turned around, Mo Ran had been pressed so close he hadn't looked down, so he hadn't noticed the evidence of Chu Wanning's arousal. But if Mo Ran were to turn around after picking up the clothes, then the Yuheng Elder's haughty and pristine reputation, the aloof and ascetic image Chu Wanning had maintained for so long, would crumble to dust in an instant.

Chu Wanning panicked. Mo Ran had already sorted and tidied up his robes and was holding them in his hands; he was about to turn his head…

Chu Wanning was left with only two choices. One: pretend his legs suddenly hurt and crouch down. Or, two: jab his disciple's eyes out.

Before he could settle on one of these two awful options, Mo Ran had already turned. "Shizun, you…"

You what?

Mo Ran didn't finish his sentence. At the sight before him, whatever he'd been about to say never made it past his lips, the words irretrievably lost.

Chapter 142:
Shizun, This Is Cruel and Unusual

IN THE SPLIT SECOND before Mo Ran looked over, inspiration had struck Chu Wanning. He'd spun around at the last possible moment, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed and leaving Mo Ran a plain view of the lean, well-proportioned muscles of his back. This way, Mo Ran wouldn't be able to see his front.

Chu Wanning thought he was being awfully clever. But the dummy didn't realize he'd only exposed to Mo Ran the sensual dimples low on his back, his full and firm buttocks, and his slender and powerful legs… He was like a rabbit who'd peeled off its own pelt and climbed over the fire to grill itself to a delectable crisp. He was practically saying, *Please enjoy, thanks.*

Mo Ran felt his throat go dry. His eyes reddened, and he had to steady himself for a moment before he could speak. "Shizun, what…what are you doing?"

What was he doing? Hm… His position was certainly a little strange. What could he say to smooth this over without arousing suspicion…? Chu Wanning glanced over his shoulder, his expression cold and solemn as he racked his brain.

Mo Ran had already set his clothes down and was walking toward him. Perhaps it was because his back was to the light—Chu Wanning thought the expression on Mo Ran's face was frightening, like a wolf in the wild that had been starved for too long and was looking at a fresh, tender piece of meat. But the meat was hung over the jaws of a trap, and thus, the wolf hesitated. His hunger and reason waged a fierce battle, the flames of it spreading to his eyes—those dark eyes were terribly bright, lit with a haunting radiance.

Finally realizing that something was not quite right, Chu Wanning nocked three sharp words on a bow and pierced through this peculiar atmosphere with one sentence: "Scrub my back."

"Huh?" It took Mo Ran a moment to respond, and when he did, it was as if the moisture in his breath had frozen in his throat; he sounded a little husky and rather sensual. "What?"

At the end of his wits, Chu Wanning had come up with a random excuse in his panic. But since he'd said it, he might as well commit. He faked calm and stonily said, "Since you're here, scrub my back before you go."

There was no reply from Mo Ran.

"I've been sweating from all the work we've done these last few days. It's uncomfortable." Chu Wanning threw everything he had into appearing nonchalant and unconcerned. "It'd be nice to be scrubbed clean."

He couldn't tell if Mo Ran was buying it, if his lies were convincing. Either way, Mo Ran obediently did as he was told. He brought over a towel, soaked it in warm water, and began to scrub Chu Wanning's back.

Yuheng of the Night Sky had always been wise. This had to be the stupidest thing he'd ever done.

What was the most excruciating torture in the world? It was to have the person he loved standing right behind him, those large hands dragging across his body, separated by a single coarse washcloth, each stroke skimming over a thin layer of water to leave a trail of heated, reddened skin in its wake. Even with Mo Ran holding his strength in check, the firmness of his strokes, along with the fact that Chu Wanning's body had never before been caressed like this, made every fiber of his muscles tremble. It was all he could do to keep his entire body still, barely managing to conceal his unusual state from the man behind him.

He pressed his forehead against the wall and bit down hard on his lip where Mo Ran couldn't see, the rims of his phoenix eyes red and his desire so unbearably hot and hard that moisture collected there as dew gathered upon a branch. He had no sexual experience whatsoever. How could he possibly stand before the one he loved and pretend to be virtuous and dignified while enduring this kind of stimulation? It was excruciating…

Now, if you asked Mo Ran what the most agonizing torture in the world would be to him? His answer would probably be somewhat different: it was to have a certain man standing naked in front of him, hands braced against the wall, smooth planes of his shoulders and back spread before him, wholly unsuspecting as he offered up his body to Mo Ran and his filthy thoughts, letting him

rub his fevered hands all over that body with only that vexatious washcloth in the way.

Mo Ran knew he was just scrubbing his shizun's back for him. But if he were to apply even a touch more force, this man's skin would bloom red, looking bullied, abused, erotic.

Mo Ran's hands pressed over Chu Wanning's shoulder blades and slid down to the small of his back. As his dawdling hands came to the sides of Chu Wanning's waist, their strokes unconsciously grew more vigorous. He thought he felt the person beneath him tremble—but he was probably just imagining it. His eyes, fixed on those fair, plump curves, grew bloodshot with the effort it took to stop himself from tossing the washcloth aside and reaching out to grab and squeeze with his bare hands until he'd left marks in the form of five provocative red streaks.

He had long since tasted the ambrosial nectar of the man before him. How could he be expected to stand before Chu Wanning and pretend to be honorable and gentlemanly while swallowing down his hunger? It was excruciating…

Time stretched endlessly as the two stewed in their respective torments. If this scrubbing were to continue, the both of them just might catch fire. At last, Chu Wanning couldn't contain himself. Voice cracking, he said, "You can go. I can reach the rest of my back; I'll do it myself."

Mo Ran, forehead covered in a sheen of sweat, released the breath he'd been holding. His voice was low. "Yes…Shizun…"

The curtains rustled; Mo Ran was gone. A long moment passed as Chu Wanning leaned against the wall, forehead pressed to the cool surface, unable to pull himself together. The tips of his ears were bloodred, mirroring the marks left in the wake of the scrubbing. He wondered whether Mo Ran had noticed.

He cracked open his phoenix eyes and bit his lower lip in humiliation. After hesitating at length, he reached down to touch himself where he was so hard it almost hurt. He'd run back to shower in an attempt to suppress these vulgar impulses. Who could've known the heavens had other plans, and circumstances would see him pushed even deeper beneath the waves of desire by Mo Ran. Chu Wanning had ever relied on his purity-based cultivation to suppress his primal needs. But now, he finally

couldn't resist any longer and resorted to this base, humiliating method to relieve himself of the desire that threatened to spill out of him. His lips were lightly parted, his phoenix eyes half-lidded. His expression was somewhat pathetic, somewhat aggrieved. He pressed his burning forehead to the icy wall, delicate shoulders hunched, and the jut of his throat bobbed as he tried to suppress his low, choked, gasps.

So sinful, yet so beautiful. Like a white swallowtail butterfly snared in a spider's web, wings powerlessly quivering in tightly knit lust, never, never, never, to escape. He'd finally been dirtied. Dirtied to the bone, dirtied so wretchedly, so pitifully, that the filth was an allure unto itself, one that tempted others to violation, drew them into addiction.

When it was over, Chu Wanning slammed his fist against the wall. That strike held so much viciousness, so much fury, so much resentment, that it split the skin of his knuckles. Blood seeped out.

"Bastard."

He didn't know if he was cursing himself or Mo Ran. Chu Wanning's eyes were damp and vaguely dazed, filled both with tender affection and regretful self-loathing.

Thus time went on; in the blink of an eye, a month had passed since they'd arrived at Yuliang Village. The busy harvest season was coming to an end.

Since the day of the back scrub, Chu Wanning had avoided Mo Ran as snakes and scorpions avoid ferocious beasts. Not because he noticed anything unusual about Mo Ran's behavior, but because he couldn't accept the change in himself.

It was natural that someone who had remained pure and austere for so many years would grow accustomed to it. Why else would Chu Wanning be so scornful toward those who paired off to dual cultivate? It wasn't that he was jealous; the Yuheng Elder truly found such acts unbearably distasteful, even sickening. He also didn't look at erotica because he really had no desire to; his avoidance wasn't put on for the sake of appearances. To Chu Wanning, liking someone or kissing them were things he could tolerate. Anything further—masturbation, for example, or

intercourse—would make his face go blue. He couldn't take it. He was like someone who had been vegetarian his entire life: he might think a bit of lard smelled good if you snuck it into his bowl, but would probably die of disgust if you gave him a piece of seared meat still pink on the inside.

That day, after he'd gotten himself off in a confused flurry, Chu Wanning had sobered. He'd panted as he stared at the stickiness in his hand and felt as if a bucket of cold water had been upended on him. His face went pale.

What was he *doing*? Was he so stirred up by a kid barely past twenty that he couldn't restrain himself, that he actually needed to touch himself to pacify the rolling tides in his heart? Gooseflesh had sprung up on Chu Wanning's back.

From that moment on, he'd kept three feet away from Mo Ran at all times, afraid he might accidentally unleash the raging beast in his heart and do something regrettable.

As he withdrew, so did Mo Ran. When Mo Ran reflected on what had happened, he, too, was terrified. He'd discovered that his yearning for Chu Wanning was much stronger than anticipated. The dam he'd erected could barely hold back the tempestuous currents, and the passion in his bones was going to overflow at any minute. He was keenly aware that one moment of weakness was all it took to go from man to beast. He didn't want to hurt Chu Wanning again, so he unconsciously avoided him.

With the distance interposed between them, they almost seemed merely a respectful disciple and a benevolent master. In this way, the days passed peacefully without incident.

One day, the village hunter caught a plump deer. The villagers proposed holding a bonfire in the evening at the small drying field near the entrance of the settlement. Every household contributed food, from pastries to dried meats, and the village chief opened two jars of gaoliang liquor. The crowd sat together, jolly with anticipation. How merry it was to watch the dancing of the bonfire, to smell the aromatic grease of roasted venison and eat and drink together.

Chu Wanning and Mo Ran sat apart. The two settled down with the bonfire between them, gazing at each other through the flames, each hoping the other wouldn't notice. One would sneak a

discreet glance only to meet the eyes of the other and pretend it was a coincidence, dropping his gaze. After a few seconds, when the other was unguarded, that gaze would secretly fix upon the other's face once more. Orange light surged and firewood crackled. Laughter and cheer flowed and eddied around them, but they had neither eyes nor ears for any other. The moon in the sky seemed to shine for these two beating hearts alone.

The jars of liquor the village chief had opened quickly emptied, but the party went on unabated. Mo Ran, remembering that he still had a jar of the top-quality pear blossom white in his own residence, excused himself and rose to go grab it.

He was halfway to his room when he heard a noise behind him. He turned. "Who's there?"

The rustling of footsteps instantly paused. A pair of verdant green shoes embroidered with yellow flowers slowly shuffled from around the corner.

Mo Ran blinked. "Oh, it's you, Miss Ling-er."

Ling-er had drunk a little too much, and her snowy, jade-like cheeks were flushed red, her lips rich and bright. She stood under the moonlight, gazing at him with affection, her full bosom rising and falling with her quickened breaths.

"Mo-xianjun," she said. "Please wait. I have something I want to say to you."

Chapter 143:
Shizun Is My Unattainable First Love, My Erstwhile Once-Lover, the Object of My Most Sincere Affection, the Source of My Most Torturous Affliction, and Has Been All Along

NO MATTER HOW slow Mo Ran might be, there was no way to misunderstand her burning gaze. Hastily, he said, “Miss Ling-er, you’ve had too much; let’s talk about this tomorrow…”

“I want to talk *now*!”

This girl was ferocious when riled up; strands of her hair were loose and her eyes were bright. Mo Ran eyed her warily. He didn’t want to be delayed here and was about to resort to qinggong to make a quick escape when she latched onto his sleeve. Mo Ran was both amused and annoyed. “Let go of me.”

“No.” It was said that booze gives confidence. Ling-er was bold to begin with, and she’d been wanting to cozy up to this xianjun from Sisheng Peak for a while now. Without further preamble, she proclaimed loudly, “I like you. Do you like me?”

Stunned, Mo Ran had no reply.

Ling-er became instantly anxious at this lack of reaction. When Mo Ran had first arrived in Yuliang Village, she had thought him quite dashing and gallant. Later, she’d learned he was the very same “Mo-zongshi” whose fame had been growing over the past few years, and her maidenly heart fell irrevocably deeper into infatuation. The busy harvest season would soon come to its end, and Mo Ran would leave. Ling-er was just some girl from the lower cultivation realm; all she had going for her were her pretty face and good figure. She didn’t know how Mo Ran felt, but she did know that if she didn’t confess her feelings now, she wouldn’t get another chance. And so, bolstered by liquid courage, she had sought out Mo Ran to corner him with her confession.

Mo Ran was honestly a bit startled by her brazen fearlessness.

Ling-er’s charming face flushed bright red as she waited with

bated breath. How wonderful it would be if Mo Ran said yes. Not only would she win herself a handsome young man as her lover, getting together with Mo Ran would also mean getting in with Sisheng Peak. She wouldn't be stuck in this podunk village; she could live comfortably, she could…

"I'm sorry, Miss Ling-er, but you'd best let me go."

His blunt reply tore down all those fanciful pavilions she'd been building in the sky. The blush on Ling-er's face had yet to recede as she blanched, and for a moment, the color of her face looked terrible. After a strangled pause, she asked anxiously, "Am—am I not pretty enough?"

"You're very pretty." Mo Ran was unfailingly polite as he gently extricated himself from her grip. "But not my type."

Whatever dignity she'd had left was completely shredded by this *not my type.* Tears welled up in Ling-er's eyes, though the heartbreak was secondary. She did fancy Mo Ran, but it was mostly an infatuation. What she really yearned for was to rise above her circumstances, and it was the shattering of those beautiful dreams that she felt more keenly. "Then…" She held back her tears and asked, "What's your type?"

"I—"

Her question left Mo Ran at a loss. What *was* his type? Out of sheer habit, he almost answered that his type was someone like Shi Mei. But before the words left his lips, he had a sudden feeling that no—that wasn't quite right. He was caught off guard, unable to answer.

"Well? What's your type?" Ling-er pressed. Her lovely eyes were fixed unwaveringly on Mo Ran's face, alert to any minute change in expression.

Ling-er's situation was a sorry one as well. She had an older sister who'd married an ordinary fabric merchant from the upper cultivation realm and moved to Leizhou many years ago to live in luxury. Ling-er and her mother had once traveled to visit her older sister, bringing with them bundles of pepper-dried fish from their village. But her sister's husband disliked the pungent stench of dried fish and saw his in-laws as unsightly country bumpkins. They were an embarrassment to keep around, and he had chased them off only

a few days into their stay.

The experience had cut deep into Ling-er's heart. Since that day, she'd been unsatisfied with her shabby life, swearing to win herself a life even better than her older sister's and pay back the humiliation she'd suffered in full. She'd spent the past few years looking for a strapping young man to marry so she could change her fate. And she really didn't want to let Mo Weiyu go.

Emboldened by alcohol and reckless with desperation, she leaned into him unsteadily. Ling-er possessed a soft and sensual figure; when she walked across the paddy fields in the summer, the men would all steal glances. Now she was going all in, betting on her warm body to pry apart Mo-zongshi's armor. She pressed her pliant flesh against his. "Am I not good enough? You didn't think it through. You didn't even consider before rejecting me like that."

But this only made Mo Ran incredibly uncomfortable. He made to pull her off him, his face rapidly darkening. "Miss Ling-er, I haven't known you for long at all. How could I like you? Why would I think of you that way?"

"How would you know unless you tried?"

She drew near for another attempt. Mo Ran immediately exclaimed, "Please stay back!"

"You really don't like me at all?" Ling-er's eyes widened, and she repeated in disbelief, "Not even a little… Just a little…?"

"I don't like you. Not even a little." Mo Ran thought maybe he hadn't been clear. When it came to such things, a clean cut was best. So even though it was cruel, he added, "I am not interested, not even a little bit."

Ling-er was speechless. She could understand if she wasn't his type. But not *interested*… How many unmarried men could face a woman who possessed such a charming face and figure, one who threw herself willingly into his arms, yet say with such righteous conviction that he wasn't *interested*? How could he face enticement from such a beauty and feel not a shred of desire? Stunned, she stood rooted to the spot for a long interval. "How…how can you… How are you…" She struggled to say the words. She actually wanted to ask, *How can you not feel any desire at all? That's not*

normal.

Mo Ran could tell what she was thinking, but he didn't feel like explaining himself. They had met by chance; even if all she wanted was a fling, he had no such intentions. She could think whatever she liked. "Sorry," he said in a low voice. Then he slipped off into the night.

The breeze blew into his face, and he couldn't help but squint. The conversation with Ling-er just now had brought on a sudden realization: when it came to love, there was something he'd always been mistaken about.

Ling-er had asked him, "What's your type?" This question was something he'd never given deep thought to before. Someone who rarely received warmth hadn't the privilege of choice; if someone treated him well, he would offer his all to them.

What's your type?

This was something he'd unconsciously never dared ask himself. In this world, everyone had their own unique tastes and biases. When Mo Ran was a child, he had often seen other children on the streets tugging at their parents' sleeves with words like, "I like these, the ones with the scallions," or "Mommy, this red lantern is prettier than the yellow one, I like red." But for him, saying something like that would have been pointless. He could only afford the cheapest plain flatbread, which he would split in half to share with his mother.

Later, when he was at the pleasure house, he would sneak peeks at the rich young masters who came around. He would watch them fan themselves languidly and say, "I liked the girl from last time, Cui-er. She's delicate, and her voice is sweet. Let's have her sing for us today too," and other such stuff. Honestly, to Mo Ran, Cui-er-zizi was nowhere near as pretty as Bairong-zizi—but who cared what he thought?

Nobody ever asked him, "What do you like?" Whether it was who was prettier or any other choice, making it was the purview of the rich and powerful. Mo Ran could only accept whatever others gave him. If there was food to eat, he should be thankful. If there were clothes to wear, he should weep in gratitude—what was this "like"?

He'd be a raving lunatic to even consider it. How could he have any preference? How could he *dare* to have a preference? What right did he have? All he had was this lowly, worthless life, and even that was a struggle to keep. Whatever he got, he would tightly grip onto. He'd lived like this for so long it became more than habit; it was ingrained into his very bones. No matter what riches and treasure he amassed, no matter how many of the finest perfumes he luxuriated in—so much that it made him sneeze—he could never cover the stench of poverty emanating from his marrow.

Growing up in poverty, his own feelings and preferences were like dirt under the sole of a shoe, completely worthless. The question "What do you like?" was something nobody would ever ask. Later, he would rise to the apex of society, becoming emperor of everything. But serving an emperor was like serving a tiger: those around him could only try to guess at his thoughts and whims. "What do you like?" became a phrase nobody would *dare to ask*.

But Ling-er had asked. A few simple words, yet they had him stumped.

He had once thought that to love someone was to respect and cherish them, to hold them in his cupped hands with greatest care, never daring to harbor even the slightest inappropriate thought toward them. This was the way he treated Shi Mei. He'd thought this was love, and there didn't seem to be anything wrong with that. But at this very moment, Mo Ran was vaguely beginning to wonder if perhaps things weren't as he'd thought.

Did he really prefer gentleness over stubbornness?

Did he really like the sweet-tempered more than the firm and unyielding?

Did he really like the tender affection of peach-blossom eyes more than the sharp and piercing frost of phoenix eyes?

Did he… Did he really like Shi Mingjing? And not…not…

He didn't dare invoke that person's name. But his heart began to race despite himself, his blood pumping hot and roiling in his veins. Mo Ran was shocked by this burst of love and desire.

Love and desire: two things never meant to be pulled apart, never meant to be separated. To be attracted by another's

appearance, bewitched by another's voice, another's scent, another's passing glances; wanting to conquer, wanting to possess, wanting to leave his own scent on unspoiled flesh that yet had no connection to him; wanting to drive his burning passion into the other's body. He had always believed love was sacred, and that the object of his love was never to be defiled. But really, how could he *not* defile him? When the form of the one he loved ardently, admired, and desired appeared before him, how could he remain unmoved? How could he suppress the fire of lust that ran through his body?

There were many kinds of love in this world, but romantic love was the kind that could never be pure and clean. It was bound to be stained with hot, sticky sweat and dyed the color of bare skin; it was braided with tangled locks of hair and the bitter pungency of photinia blossoms;[8] it was clouded with moans and passion. It was a tender, glistening flower that could only bloom in the sultry, damp mud of a warmed bed.

Mo Ran fled urgently into the night. He came to an abrupt stop, his eyes startlingly bright, his expression dumfounded. Something seemed to have snapped in his brain. The raging currents he had suppressed with complacency and stupid stubbornness dragged him under with inexorable force, drowning him, swallowing him whole. He stood rooted in horror.

Lust, desire.

Love.

Chu Wanning…

He finally unearthed that name. Cleared away sand and dirt to reveal precious treasure. It had always been Chu Wanning… This intimate feeling, this blazing love, it had always belonged to Chu Wanning!

His vision went dark. Two lifetimes' worth of delusion had been shattered, and fragments of brick and tile were swept by violent tides, crashing upon the walls of his heart, making it hard to breathe. He was dumbstruck. Could this have been the truth all along? Had he been wrong about the one he liked all this time, about his so-called love?

By the time Mo Ran returned to the bonfire hugging the jar of pear blossom white, Ling-er was gone. Of course, no one had

noticed the young girl's departure, so no one had known of her conversation with Mo Ran earlier. The crowd still drank in merriment, lively as ever.

After three rounds, the villagers began to play games. They wove a grass wreath with a rice stalk while someone went up to beat the drums. When the drumming stopped, whoever held the grass wreath would be asked a question they were rule-bound to answer. The farming folks of the lower cultivation realm entertained themselves this way when they had a few moments of idleness. The rules were simple and easy to understand. Even someone like Chu Wanning, who didn't have a single frivolous bone in his body, could easily join in.

"All right, it's Old Bai's turn! Come on, Old Bai, come draw your lot!"

Old Bai grabbed a tightly folded sheet of paper from the giant bowl with a look of misery. He opened it and read aloud, "What's better, a woman with large tits or a fat ass?"

The crowd erupted into laughter. Old Bai flushed with anger and waved the slip of paper overhead as he yelled, "Which one of you dumbasses wrote this question?! I'll fuck your fucking ancestors!"

"Hold on now." One of the villagers laughed and tugged on his shirt. "Don't go fuck the fucking ancestors yet. First answer the question."

Old Bai's wife was sitting next to him, glaring at him with her bullfrog-like eyes until his hair stood on end. He hemmed and hawed, then eventually said in a small voice, "I think they're both pretty good."

"Bullshit, you lying liar!" someone bellowed, laughing. "You told me just the other day you like 'em thick, with childbearing hips! What're you doing, lying like this! Drink up! That's the penalty for lying, so drink!"

Old Bai could only grimace and drink. The moment he was done, his wife dragged him off by the ear, chewing him out the whole way.

Hidden in the crowd, Chu Wanning found himself equally discomfited and intrigued by this game. If these vulgar questions

were posed to him, however, he would certainly be unable to answer.

Just then, the village chief held up a strip of black cloth about a foot long and said with a grin, “Let’s change the drummer; switch Old Zhang out so he can play too. Who wants to take over?”

Chu Wanning was quick to volunteer: “I’ll do it.”

He walked over to the drum of thick cowhide, took the drumsticks, and settled himself down. The village chief covered his eyes with the strip of cloth, adjusting it carefully. “Too tight?”

“No.”

“Can you see through it?”

“No.”

The village chief smiled. “All right then, Xianjun, go ahead and start beating the drum. Stop whenever you like.”

“Okay.” Chu Wanning raised the drumsticks and experimentally tapped the leather surface a couple times. Soon he was nimbly tapping out staccato drumbeats, rhythmic and fast-paced.

Blindfolded as he was, he couldn’t know that Mo Ran was watching him across the bonfire with a gaze full of turmoil and confusion. Sparks flew from the fire like orange fireflies scattering into the black night. He gazed at that man whose white robes brushed the ground. Like a sharp blade, his gaze scraped across every inch of Chu Wanning’s face, from his forehead to the tip of his nose, his lips, his chin. Chu Wanning held an indescribable allure to Mo Ran, blindfolded as he was like this. This time, Mo Ran did not allow that allure to slip from his grasp; instead, he chewed it over in his mind, lapped at it in his thoughts.

Within it, he found the taste of love.

He felt once more the shock in his heart, and he once more verified it… He was not mistaken. He *did* feel love toward Chu Wanning. It was not the kind of love between master and disciple, and certainly not a love born from mere gratitude. He was simply in love with him, and desired him, and wanted him.

He…

Finally he realized that, all this time, he had loved Chu Wanning. It was love. He couldn't believe how obtuse he'd been, how biased, how foolish, how blind. He couldn't believe it had taken him this long to come to his senses.

He was in love with Chu Wanning.

The mound of dirt that had been piled over the grave of his mind finally burst open. Memory after memory that had never made sense, question after question that had gone unanswered—all came rushing up in the wake of this late-realized love.

But he didn't have a chance to savor it or think it over. The drum ceased its beat with a final *dong*, its echo lingering in the air. The grass wreath chose this exact moment to land on Mo Ran's knees, and he picked it up in a daze. He looked up just in time to see Chu Wanning sigh as he pulled the black blindfold aside with one hand. Those phoenix eyes blinked, bright and clear as moonlight, and looked over, pure and guileless, curious as the rest to know where the wreath had landed when the drum stopped.

His eyes met Mo Ran's.

An awkward silence stretched between them. Few things were more uncomfortable than locking eyes with someone you'd been sneaking peeks at. Their gazes met, both evasive.

But that didn't last. Chu Wanning noticed with a start the complicated, confused tenderness on Mo Ran's handsome face. A tenderness so starkly and scaldingly visible, leaping across the crowd and the sparks of the bonfire, a tenderness that wasn't concealed in the least; trying would have been futile. Chu Wanning's phoenix eyes widened imperceptibly.

"Looks like you're the lucky one, Mo-xianjun." Laughing, the village chief pulled Mo Ran to his feet.

Mo Ran hesitated, then put the woven grass wreath on his head according to the rules. His dark eyes were bright, but he felt lost. Crowned with rice stalks, he stole another careful glance at Chu Wanning. That handsome, tanned face began to gradually flush red under the firelight.

Chu Wanning was startled by his peculiar reaction. His eyes grew wider as he stared at Mo Ran until they were almost round. Under Chu Wanning's naked stare, Mo Ran lowered his gaze,

lips pursed and utterly silent, looking obedient and a little bashful. He was acting like a slow-witted youth who had reached the age where love was on the mind and was experiencing his first puppy love: all clumsy and awkward, pathetically yet adorably so.

If Chu Wanning had been startled before, he was shocked now. Was he going blind? Why else was he seeing this strapping, red-blooded young man acting like a blushing maiden? Was he possessed?!

Chapter 144:
Shizun, I Like You

MO RAN PLUCKED a piece of paper from the massive bowl and unfolded it, spreading it flat. Upon seeing its contents, he first let out a breath of relief, then quickly became nervous.

"What is it?" the village chief asked.

Mo Ran showed him the paper. The village chief took one look and laughed. "Good thing there aren't any girls from Xianjun's sect here, or Mo-xianjun might've been put in a tricky spot."

Chu Wanning, already deeply curious about the question Mo Ran had picked up, now grew even more so. He stared at that slip of paper as if he was going to burn a hole through it.

Mo Ran said, laughing, "But take a look. Village Chief, this has to be against the rules, right? Everyone else only got one question, but this one's technically asking *three*."

"What can I say? Xianjun got lucky, I guess!" the village chief said. "If Xianjun isn't happy with it, toss it out and grab a new one."

But a new one would probably net something along the lines of "Do women with long legs or thin waists look better." Mo Ran smiled and said, "Forget it, let's stick with this one." He handed the paper back to the village chief and announced, "The question I picked asked me to talk about the three people I like the most."

Chu Wanning had no words.

It was just at this time that a red-eyed Ling-er returned to the group. Afraid the others would see she'd been crying, she didn't squeeze her way to the front, but instead sat on the outskirts of the crowd. Mo Ran didn't notice her. In fact, once Mo Ran had shared what was on his paper, he'd fixed his gaze on the bonfire. It was such a personal question. He felt that he would be smothered by sheer awkwardness if he looked at anybody while answering, so he avoided eye contact altogether. The flickering of the fire reflected in his black eyes, casting his handsome face in light and shadow. He stared at it for a long moment, lost in thought, then eventually

began. “I’ll start with my mom.”

He said: “My mom passed on when I was very young. Honestly, I don’t really remember what she looked like. I only remember that when she was around, I always had food to eat and a safe place to sleep. So if I have to name three people, she’s one of them.”

The village chief nodded. “She sounds like quite the loving mother. All right, that counts as one, Xianjun.”

“The second one is my shige. He’s very kind to me, and while we share no blood bond, he treats me better than a brother by birth.”

This was an answer Chu Wanning had expected, so there was scarcely a ripple on his face or in his heart. Mo Ran’s affection for Shi Mei was blindingly obvious; Chu Wanning had heard as much with his own ears back at Jincheng Lake, so he wasn’t surprised. He only gazed at that man who shone in the light of the night’s fire: chiseled figure firm and powerful, face incredibly handsome, and willfulness lining his bones.

A great deal of a person’s spirit showed in their eyes, and Mo Ran’s bright, black eyes were vivacious, like a lamp that would never go out as long as a drop of oil remained. Someone with eyes like these was sure to be incredibly stubborn, and Chu Wanning was very taken with this kind of stubbornness. Alas, this stubbornness wasn’t his for the taking.

Mo Ran went on about how great Shi Mingjing was, but Chu Wanning heard none of it. Chilled by the night breeze, he poured himself a cup of hot tea, wrapping his hands around it and sipping it slowly. The tea warmed him from the inside out; down his throat, down to his belly, until even his heart felt like it had mellowed. He silently poured himself another cup.

Yet as he was about to take another sip, he heard Mo Ran, who had just finished praising Shi Mingjing, pause for a moment before saying: “There’s one more. The third person I want to mention is my shizun.”

“Hack hack hack—!” Chu Wanning choked on his tea as if his throat had been burned, spluttering and coughing nonstop, his face deeply flushed. So focused was he on wiping up the tea that he

never once looked up at Mo Ran. When someone was used to their feelings being insignificant in the eyes of others, being pulled out of the ground and exposed would only make them scared and anxious about the dirt they were covered in; they would only want to dart back into the darkness once more, curling up to hide.

But Mo Ran obviously was not planning on giving Chu Wanning a chance to escape. The man was so closed off: if he had his way, he'd only ever show you his back; he'd never turn to look at you. He appeared fiery and fierce, eyes sharp as blades, filled with the promise of attack, with roaring thunder, but Mo Ran knew it was no more than a carefully crafted mask. After all, he had seen the gentleness of Chu Wanning's human soul, so pitiful and helpless within the steaming mist of Mengpo Hall.

He didn't want to see Chu Wanning mistreat himself like that anymore. His shizun should never have to wear that savage, terrifying mask ever again. If he and that pride of his were unwilling to take it off, then Mo Ran would extend a helping hand.

Not much tea had been spilled, and whatever spilled had long since been cleaned up. Yet Chu Wanning still wiped away at invisible stains. He was used to spinning a cocoon around himself, so he didn't look up. Gradually, he realized that it had gone quiet around him, so quiet it was a little queer.

A child giggled and said in a loud whisper: "Mom, Chu-xianjun is such a dummy."

The mother hastened to cover her thoughtless child's mouth with a hush. But Chu Wanning had heard. *Dummy*…

No, Yuheng of the Night Sky could not have less resemblance to the word "dummy": he was unbridled and sharp, fierce and cold, he was—

"Shizun, if you wipe any harder, you'll wipe a hole through the table."

A pair of black cloth boots approached, drew closer, and encroached into his personal space before they stopped. A shadow stretched over Chu Wanning, its presence bearing down on him with the force of a lofty mountain, so heavy he found it hard to breathe, so heavy it was a little humiliating, and a little enraging from how humiliating it was.

He was suddenly furious, vexed by his own unexpected vulnerability. He slapped the handkerchief down and jerked his chin up, full of animosity, phoenix eyes brimming with rage as he glared at Mo Ran, coiled and ready to attack.

In that same second, Mo Ran said, full of respect and gentleness: “Shizun, pay attention to me.”

This phrase was like a spell, uttered as it was at the precise moment Chu Wanning had looked up. Only Chu Wanning knew it was coincidence, that he hadn’t raised his head in response to Mo Ran’s plea for attention. But so what? To Mo Ran and the watching crowd, it looked like Chu Wanning had responded promptly to his disciple’s request.

Promptly. There was nothing more humiliating. He felt like his dignity had been utterly lost. Chu Wanning’s face was like ice, but his eyes sparked with fire.

Yet what he met was only Mo Ran’s gentle and warm gaze that, like boundless spring water, washed over his sharp-toothed rage and effortlessly engulfed it.

“Shizun,” Mo Ran said, “my third answer is you.”

Left with nowhere to vent his indignation, Chu Wanning resorted to indifference. “Mn,” he said after a long moment. He was the picture of cool composure. So very calm and dignified, a Chu-zongshi above worldly concerns. Chu Wanning mentally patted himself on the back for his performance.

Mo Ran watched in amusement. Mo-zongshi thought to himself—could it be that this Chu-zongshi actually was…kind of a little dummy?

Chu Wanning was completely oblivious to the fact that he’d been slapped with the label of *little dummy* in his disciple’s mind. In his nervousness, he retreated even further behind his cold and haughty demeanor. “Well?” he demanded. “Did you want something?”

The question unwittingly hit the mark, and the smile on Mo Ran’s face stiffened. Mo Ran wanted everything.

But he couldn’t have anything.

So what if he liked Chu Wanning? He’d discovered it too late,

when that person was too far out of reach. He'd spent two lifetimes chasing after Shi Mei, only to realize that he'd loved the wrong person, that he had to turn around…in truth, it was difficult for him to accept as well.

If he had understood his own heart at the time of his rebirth, perhaps it wouldn't have been too late. But this belated discovery only added to his misery. He'd inflicted too many cruel torments onto Chu Wanning's body in the previous life. To him, sex had become something he used to torture the proud, unyielding man beneath him. He saw Chu Wanning as an immortal being, above worldly desires, beyond such things as love or lust.

When it came to ruining Chu Wanning, Mo Ran knew of countless ways to ravish and plunder. But when it came to treating him well? Mo Ran couldn't think of many ways at all. He seemed to have turned really stupid, like he'd suddenly become an idiot: all he could think to do was maintain a proper distance between his shizun and himself, to place his shizun on an altar while he prostrated himself on the ground.

Enfolded in this third "like" was a scalding and secret love. But Mo Ran couldn't afford to let Chu Wanning notice that. He could only restrain himself and disguise his feelings of adoration as simple affection between master and disciple, which he very respectfully presented to Chu Wanning.

And so Mo Ran replied, "I just wanted to let Shizun know. That's all."

Chu Wanning watched him silently.

"It's just," Mo Ran added, "I couldn't help but want everyone to know…"

"Know what?"

Mo Ran smiled. His black eyes shone with a light so brilliant it concealed the turbulent undercurrents of desire. "To know how lucky I am," he said, still grinning. "To have the world's best, best, best shizun."

The same superlative three times in a row: what a clumsy expression, yet one he'd worked extremely hard on. This was precisely the style of Mo Ran's unpolished simplicity.

Chu Wanning gazed at him with an unfathomable expression. Only his lashes quivered minutely. Mo Ran took a deep breath; he didn't know where his courage was coming from, but he felt that if he missed his chance now, he might never find such boldness in himself again for the rest of his life. He abruptly dropped to one knee, attempting to bring himself level with Chu Wanning where he sat. Unfortunately, with his size and height, Mo Ran still towered over his shizun even while kneeling. But he couldn't care about that right now. He could only feel how fast his heart was racing and how rapidly his blood was flowing.

"Shizun."

Chu Wanning eyed him, suddenly wary. He saw so much anxiety in Mo Ran's eyes that he reflexively leaned back, just a little.

Yet still the sharp arrow pierced right through his heart.

"I like you."

Chu Wanning had nowhere to run; the deer bounding through the woods had been shot by the hunter and crumpled silently to the ground. Chu Wanning stared at him blankly. A dull droning filled his mind, and he could neither hear nor see…

Like—what a reserved, ambiguous word. Unlike "love," so nakedly forthright that it would scorch a person's heart, "like" was a word that could be interpreted in myriad ways, allowing lovesick men and women everywhere to confess their feelings beneath a veneer of calm, allowing them an outlet for some part of the affection that filled their hearts to bursting.

Mo Ran thought to himself: *I like you, but I don't want to alarm you or force you into anything. You will think I speak of the affection a disciple shows toward his master. It's unfortunate for me, but surely this is the limit of what you'd want from a disciple.*

Meanwhile, Chu Wanning thought to himself: *You say you like me, but it's a liking born of pity, out of obligation to the one who taught you and saved your life. This is not the way I want to be liked. But I've done all I can to garner this affection; I have no strength left, no more bargaining chips to trade for anything more. For you to acknowledge me as your shizun, to have this form of liking, is enough for me. I won't ask for more.*

Neither said anything more, and the crowd watching the show praised the deep affection between master and disciple. Only Linger, hidden in her corner, sensed something amiss. The expression on Mo Ran's handsome face seemed to conceal some deeply suppressed desire, a desire so ardent it pricked her senses. But she was a naïve girl who had grown up in a tiny village; homosexuality was something she had no inkling of. She couldn't quite pinpoint what felt so *off*.

In this world, there would always be people who were thoughtless and unreserved, bold and domineering, brazenly strutting about with a devil-may-care attitude…just as long as they weren't in love. Once these people fell in love, they became a pan of hot oil on a blazing fire, hearts and eyes aflame. They would constantly yearn for the desire in their hearts to be discovered by its target, wanting nothing more than to plunge deep into the ocean of passion with them, to be forever entwined.

But should the target of their wanting actually learn the truth? These people would then exist in an endless state of trepidation, fearing that the object of their affection didn't return their feelings, afraid that they would be rejected, continuously on edge. Never mind if the devil cared: if a cricket were to chirp once or twice on a tree as it went about its crickety business, these people would take it as an omen, anxiously thinking, *Oh heavens, the crickets have chirped. Is this a sign he doesn't like me?*

At its haziest, love was a guessing game, a game of hide-and-seek. It saturated all the air in a two-mile radius with its sour stench. Mo Weiyu had been Taxian-jun in the previous life. Now he was Mo-zongshi. Notorious and infamous back then; renowned and celebrated now. Once the most wicked of devils, he'd since become the most virtuous of men. But still, he'd never been able to escape that stench.

As for Chu Wanning? When it came to matters of love, this guy was like a fish caught in a net. The slightest disturbance would have him all tangled up until his head ached in confusion. Even so, he would rather die than lose face, so he would huff and say, *What a sour, rotten business. Nothing worth discussing.*

A man truly digging his own grave.

Chapter 145:
Shizun Has a Mealtime Companion Now

THE BUSY HARVEST season ended with the turning colors of the leaves. The villagers of Yuliang Village prepared an assortment of parcels, large and small, packed full of jerky, rice cakes, spices, and homespun cloth. They thrust these parcels into Chu Wanning and Mo Ran's arms.

Sisheng Peak did not lack for food or goods. But these were heartfelt gifts; to reject them would be rude. Thus the two accepted the parcels and helped the village chief fill the saddlebags.

Ling-er was there too, hugging a bamboo basket covered in a porcelain-patterned cloth. A lifted corner revealed fresh-steamed flatbreads and a dozen green-shelled, hard-boiled eggs. She paused in front of Mo Ran's horse, her bright, black eyes unable to meet his gaze. She wanted to look at him, but the memory of her tipsy confession of the other night was too mortifying. After some hesitant shuffling, she eventually came over, raising the basket above her head, and said to the handsome man seated astride the horse, "Mo-xianjun, I…I made these just this morning, for you and Chu-xianjun to eat on the road."

Mo Ran hesitated, unsure of her intentions; he didn't know whether to accept or decline. Ling-er understood his misgivings. She lifted her head. Despite the blush on her face, there was stubbornness and some hurt in her gaze. She might have tried everything to win the affection of this extraordinary xianjun, but she wasn't one of those girls with no dignity, who would continue clinging on after a clear rejection. "Relax, Xianjun," she said, "Ling-er doesn't mean anything by it. I just want to thank Xianjun for taking care of Yuliang Village these last couple weeks."

Only then did Mo Ran take the basket. From his seat atop his horse, he looked down and replied sincerely, "Many thanks, miss."

"Xianjun is most welcome."

When he saw that she was sensible about things, he felt more friendly toward her. After a pause, he asked: "Do you have any

plans for the future, miss?"

"Why does Xianjun ask?"

"I just think you don't seem like a girl who wants to live in a small village for long."

Ling-er smiled, the fight coming back to her eyes. "I want to visit the upper cultivation realm. I hear Rufeng Sect's leader is kind and willing to lend a hand to ambitious people of little means. As long as those of us from the lower cultivation realm can find work in Linyi, they won't chase us off. My needlework is decent, and I also know how to cook. I should be able to get by."

Of course, she didn't say the most important part out loud—out of the ten great sects, Rufeng Sect had the most disciples and its domain stretched across a vast territory, totaling seventy-two cities of varying size. Moreover, Linyi was well-known as a cultivator's hub; out of ten people on its streets, five would be cultivators.

But Chu Wanning hadn't guessed her intentions; when he heard she was headed to Linyi, his brows knitted slightly. "Things at Rufeng aren't as simple as you might think. If miss only wants to settle in the upper cultivation realm, perhaps consider Yangzhou's Rainbell Isle instead."

"It's impossible to make a living in Yangzhou; everything is too expensive," Ling-er said. "Xianjun's advice is appreciated, but Ling-er has already thought it over."

She'd made her stance clear. Chu Wanning knew it would be futile to press, so he let it go.

The two set off on their horses with their saddlebags stuffed to bursting. As they passed by Butterfly Town, Chu Wanning took a close look at the barrier there. Fortunately, the spiritual current was plentiful and everything remained stable. They continued riding and were back at Sisheng Peak by noon.

Chu Wanning went off to brief Xue Zhengyong on how things had gone. Mo Ran, left at loose ends, strolled about idly. As he neared Naihe Bridge, he encountered someone scrubbing the stone lions on the bridge's columns.

Who had been punished with manual labor? Not wishing to embarrass the offender, Mo Ran decided to take another route. Yet

just as he was turning around, he heard a familiar voice call out across the distance. “A-Ran!”

Upon closer inspection, the one scrubbing the lions was Shi Mei. Mo Ran was momentarily taken aback, feeling somewhat strange. For one, it was odd to find someone as rule-abiding as Shi Mei getting punished. For another, there was Shi Mei’s current appearance. Even though it’d been some time since Mo Ran had been introduced to this fully grown version of Shi Mei, he hadn’t gotten used to it. Instead, Mo Ran found Shi Mei’s face and figure increasingly unfamiliar as time went on. He almost hadn’t recognized him at first glance just now.

“What are you doing here? Got in trouble?” Mo Ran asked as he walked over.

Shi Mei looked a little abashed. “Mn…together with the young master.”

“Mengmeng?” Mo Ran paused for a moment, then chuckled. That would explain it. It was true that Xue Meng was always getting himself into trouble. “What did he drag you into this time?”

“He said he wanted to go to the forbidden grounds in the mountain’s backwoods to catch a few monsters for training.”

Mo Ran’s eyebrows rose.

“He ended up almost stabbing apart the crack in the barrier Shizun sealed before he left.”

Mo Ran didn’t know if he should laugh or cry. “Does he think monsters are something he can catch and keep, like cats and dogs? And you! Don’t just play along with him when he’s messing around —why didn’t you try to talk him out of it?”

Shi Mei sighed in exasperation. “Of course I tried to talk him out of it. It was no use. I was afraid it’d be dangerous, so I had to go with him… Never mind, forget it, at least nothing really terrible happened. What about you, A-Ran? You and Shizun went to Yuliang Village to help with the harvest a while back, right?”

“Mn.”

“How was it? Everything go smoothly?”

“Yeah, not too bad.”

The two made small talk for a time. After bidding farewell to Shi Mei, Mo Ran walked alone down a small, tree-lined path in silence. With his newfound clarity, he could see in hindsight that his feelings toward Shi Mei had been more of an obsession, something he held on to out of habit, and not the love he'd thought. He'd once believed that because he looked at Shi Mei and thought him beautiful, thought him divinely ethereal, and thought his presence comforting, that *this* was desire. But it was not.

People had always appreciated beautiful things. Mo Ran appreciated Shi Mei's beauty, but a closer examination revealed that this appreciation carried no intimate desire. Mo Ran enjoyed looking at Shi Mei the same way he enjoyed looking at the mountains cloaked with red leaves in the autumn and ponds crowded with lotus blossoms in the summer. But in all these years, he'd basically never had any inappropriate thoughts.

He still cherished Shi Mei and cared for him as before. Yet it was not the same. Mo Ran finally understood what love was. He was no virtuous ascetic; his love was hot and steamy, accompanied by the urge to conquer, by the slap of flesh against flesh, by the rushing of blood and the spilling of fluids. He was a wolf that could appreciate the scent of wild roses. But wolves had fangs, and tastes to match; what he fed on was not grass or flowers, but blood and flesh.

By dinner time, Xue Meng had finally finished organizing the books in the second classics section of the library. He whined in exhaustion, sprawling over the table at Mengpo Hall as he issued a steady stream of complaints. Even his usual favorite, deep-fried diced chicken with chili peppers, couldn't cheer him up.

As he played listlessly with his chopsticks, he spied Chu Wanning entering the dining hall. The sight finally gave him the energy to straighten up and call out, "Shizun!"

Chu Wanning looked over and nodded.

Mo Ran sat beside Xue Meng; he, Xue Meng, and Shi Mei had always eaten as a trio. But today, when Chu Wanning walked in, Mo Ran set about shifting all the plates and bowls around to make space at their table.

"What are you doing?" Xue Meng asked.

Mo Ran threw Xue Meng a grin. He stood and waved to Chu Wanning. "Shizun, come sit here."

Xue Meng and Shi Mei gaped at him. They respected their shizun, certainly, but sharing a meal with him was another matter altogether. To eat with someone regularly required a certain level of familiarity and comfort, if only so one could tolerate the sounds their dining partner emitted as they crunched on bones and smacked their lips, could ignore the ugly faces they made while eating or any slips in table manners. Judging by the expressions on Xue Meng and Shi Mei's faces, it was plain that, though Chu Wanning's own etiquette was impeccable, they were not used to eating with him, and they didn't want to eat with him. To them, the occasional meal together with their shizun was an obligatory social nicety wherein both parties had to be on their best behavior. After those meals, their backs would often be stiff from tension and they wouldn't have tasted a bite of what they ate.

Chu Wanning understood this as well. He looked in surprise at Mo Ran, then shook his head and made straight for his usual spot, carrying some simple vegetable dishes.

He hadn't taken a meal in Mengpo Hall in five years. As Chu Wanning took his seat, he noticed a small, ornamental copper plate nailed into the corner of the table. On it were engraved the words: *Reserved for Yuheng Elder.* He stared at it for a long, silent moment. What was *wrong* with Xue Zhengyong?!

He sat gloomily, setting his wooden tray down with a heavy rattle. Yet before he could take a bite, someone pulled back the wooden chair across from him, claiming a seat at the table "Reserved for Yuheng Elder." He placed his own tray right next to Chu Wanning's—pressed very close, almost touching.

Chu Wanning looked up and at length said, "What are you doing here?"

"It's too cramped over there," Mo Ran said, grinning happily as he picked up his rice bowl. "So I've come to eat with Shizun."

Chu Wanning glanced at where Xue Meng and Shi Mei sat, baffled. In what world was it cramped? The two deserted by Mo Ran wore similarly puzzled expressions as they peeked over at Chu

Wanning and Mo Ran's table. Shi Mei stared wordlessly. Xue Meng mumbled, "Is that mutt out of his mind?"

Mo Ran had more pressing concerns. He'd stolen a glimpse at the dishes Chu Wanning had picked earlier and it'd left him all twitchy. Chu Wanning was a picky eater, and particularly fussy about what he would and wouldn't touch; it was always this thing would upset his stomach, or that thing tasted gross. Mo Ran couldn't imagine it was healthy; the nutritional imbalance was bound to become an issue once Chu Wanning got older. In the past, he couldn't have cared less what Chu Wanning ate. But things were different now. Aside from the fact that he liked Chu Wanning, Mo Ran was also his disciple. It was his duty to see that his shizun ate properly.

But getting Chu Wanning to eat was an art in itself. In much the same way one couldn't shove food into a cat's mouth and expect them to eat it, brute force wouldn't work on this man if he had an aversion to something. An idea came to Mo Ran. He plucked up a piece of braised pork, neither too fat nor too lean, and placed it in Chu Wanning's bowl. "Shizun, try this."

Just as expected, Chu Wanning frowned. "I don't like pork belly," he said. "Take it away."

Mo Ran had prepared his strategy in advance. He said, smiling, "I hear it's done sweet, Jiangnan-style."

"The way they cook meat in Jiangnan isn't like this." Chu Wanning said.

"How would you know if you don't try it?"

"I can tell from looking at it."

"But the cook said it's Jiangnan-style." Mo Ran set the trap, waiting for the cat to wander in. He said, still smiling, "Mengpo Hall's cook is an experienced veteran, how can he be wrong? It must be that Shizun's been away from home for so long you forgot what braised pork from your hometown looks like."

"Absurd," Chu Wanning countered. "How could I possibly forget?"

Mo Ran ate a piece, making a show of carefully tasting it, then said earnestly, "I really think it's Shizun who's wrong. This meat is

so sweet—try a piece if you don't believe me."

Chu Wanning was utterly oblivious to Mo Ran's ulterior motive. Unconvinced, he picked up the braised pork and put it in his mouth.

"What do you think?" Mo Ran held back his laughter as he watched this big white cat take the bait.

Chu Wanning frowned in earnest consideration. "It's not right. The taste of star anise is too strong. I'm going to go tell the cook; this isn't how you make Jiangnan's braised pork."

"Wait, wait—" Mo Ran hurriedly stopped him with a tug, feeling a little speechless. He hadn't thought this guy would take it so seriously. If Chu Wanning confronted the cook, wouldn't Mo Ran be exposed? "Don't be hasty, Shizun; the cook must be busy right now. If Shizun says it's not right, then it definitely isn't. I'll let him know later. Let's just finish our meals first."

Thinking this reasonable, Chu Wanning sat back down and returned to his meal. The crafty Mo Ran moved to the next step of his dastardly plan. This time, he picked up a piece of fish.

Chu Wanning's chopsticks faltered. "Shad fish?"

"Mn."

"I don't want it. Take it away."

"Why not?"

"Don't like it."

Mo Ran grinned. "Because it has too many bones?"

A long pause, then: "No."

"But whenever Shizun eats fish, it's always the ones without bones, or ones with larger bones that are easy to pick out. There's no way Shizun won't eat shad because it's a small fish with lots of bones, right?" Mo Ran laughed.

He was all too familiar with Chu Wanning's soft spots and knew just how to poke them. Sure enough, Chu Wanning was fooled again. Irked, he said, "How ridiculous." Then he picked up the piece of shad Mo Ran had placed in his bowl and ate it, clearly demonstrating that he certainly *could* eat fish with lots of bones.

Just like that, Chu Wanning was unwittingly coaxed by

Mo Ran into eating far more variety than usual, with meat and greens from almost every dish. What would've been a quick meal dragged on for almost an hour, and still they weren't done. By the time they returned their dishes and left, Xue Meng and Shi Mei were long gone, and only a handful of disciples remained inside Mengpo Hall.

Mo Ran walked Chu Wanning back to the Red Lotus Pavilion. The sun slowly sank below the horizon as they walked the tree-lined path, twilight spreading across the skies. The night breeze blew, and Mo Ran strolled languidly with his hands clasped behind his head. All of a sudden, he smiled and said, "Shizun."

"What do you want?"

"Nothing, I just wanted to call out to you."

Chu Wanning eyed him. "Are you so stuffed with food that all the nonsense is coming out of you?"

Mo Ran's smile grew soft, "Yup, totally stuffed. So Shizun, can I keep eating with you in the future?"

Chu Wanning knew Mo Ran didn't mean anything by it, but his heart couldn't help but skip a couple beats. Fortunately, his gaze remained steady. "Why? Are you fighting with Xue Meng?"

"No, no, that's not it," Mo Ran waved the notion aside with a laugh. "It's just that I haven't eaten in their company for so long. It's been five whole years. Sitting together again feels a little awkward. But if Shizun thinks I'll get in the way, I'll find another place to eat by myself tomorrow, it's fine."

Chu Wanning didn't immediately reply.

Of course, Mo Ran couldn't say, *I feel bad for you, always eating alone,* and neither could he say, *I want to make sure you eat well.* Mo Ran didn't have to try to know neither approach would work. What he could do was feign vulnerability, confess how pitifully lonely he was, and say that he really wanted company. Chu Wanning had ever been kindhearted; he definitely wouldn't deny him.

Mo Ran could see the resolve crumbling in Chu Wanning's eyes. All he needed was one last push: "But honestly, I really don't want to eat alone."

“Why’s that?”

Mo Ran lowered his soft lashes. His small smile was half genuine emotion, half playing it up to get Chu Wanning on the hook. “Shizun, someone who eats by themselves is simply satisfying hunger, don’t you think?” He paused for a moment, and in the splendid red glow of dusk, brushed aside the loose strands of hair blown against his forehead by the breeze. His dimples were deep as he gazed intently at the other man. “When two people share both food and company, that’s when you really taste the food, feel its warmth. *That’s* called eating a meal.”

Chu Wanning watched him silently.

“Shizun, can I still eat with you tomorrow?”

There was no defense against the little wolf-pup when he made an effort to be sincere. Mo Ran had a stubbornness about him that stirred the heart as he said: “Shizun, I spent five years all alone out there. Now that you’re awake, I’ll always eat with you. It’d feel weird without you. And I promise I won’t eat rabbit heads or duck necks.” A puff of laughter escaped toward the end, and he shamelessly tugged at Chu Wanning’s sleeve. “I’ll eat tofu with scallion and sweet osmanthus lotus roots with you. So say yes, pretty please?”

Mo Ran had actually been doing quite well up to that point. But with this, he accidentally reminded Chu Wanning of an unsettled score. A menacing expression settled over his face as he chuckled coldly, “Fine by me, but you have to eat exactly what I do in the mornings.”

“Sure!” Mo Ran agreed before he’d fully processed Chu Wanning’s words. “Wait, what do you eat in the morning?”

“Savory tofu pudding.” Chu Wanning replied cruelly. “With seaweed.”

Mo Ran blinked, flabbergasted. Was Chu Wanning *seriously* bringing up ancient grudges from the time they had hotpot together when he was Xia Sini?

Chu Wanning ground out through clenched teeth, “And. Dried. Shrimp.”

Chapter 146:
Shizun, Is She Really Getting Married?

FROM THAT DAY forward, Mengpo Hall was the setting of an extraordinary sight. The table "Reserved for Yuheng Elder," long off-limits to even the boldest disciples, now accommodated one Mo Weiyu. Disciples passing by would frequently see Mo Ran and Chu Wanning seated across the table from each other, eating together. And every time, Mo Ran would pick a morsel from some dish and place it in his shizun's bowl.

"Whoa, check it out, Mo-shixiong's doing it again."

A group of nearby disciples whispered with their heads together, betting amongst themselves in hushed voices.

"Look at that huge piece of brisket he just put in the elder's bowl. I bet Yuheng Elder's not gonna eat it."

"I'll bet the same. Yuheng Elder doesn't seem to like beef."

"Then I'll bet he *does* eat it, since he ate those pigeon eggs the other time."

As the little spies looked on with bated breath, Chu Wanning frowned and poked at the beef with his chopsticks, then said something to Mo Ran with a gloomy expression. They were too far away to hear much of anything, but whatever Mo Ran said in response made Chu Wanning's expression even gloomier. The three disciples who'd bet Chu Wanning wouldn't eat instantly brightened up, so intent on watching the pair that they nearly brought their soup spoons to their noses instead of their mouths.

"Look, look! The elder's not eating it, he's refusing!"

"Don't jab me with your elbow, and keep it down. If Yuheng Elder hears the lot of you placing bets on him, he'll skin you alive!"

"Heh heh heh, I don't care, these twenty silver leaves are allllllll mine."

That smug disciple reached for the stack of silver leaves piled on the table. But before he touched it, he heard his friends beside him whisper hastily, "Hold on, the bet hasn't been called yet, the

elder's chopsticks are moving again!"

"Huh?"

A second glance revealed that, sure enough, Chu Wanning was picking up that piece of beef brisket. The group of gamblers anxiously watched, as though it were their hearts grasped by that pair of white jade chopsticks, trapped and tender from pinching.

"He's gonna eat it, he's gonna eat it, he's gonna eat it… Twenty silver leaves, twenty silver leaves, twenty silver leaves…" The disciple who had bet Chu Wanning would eat the brisket chanted, jiggling his leg nervously. Suddenly he froze, crestfallen. "Ah!"

The Yuheng Elder had flung the beef right back into Mo Ran's bowl with no heed for Mo Ran's protests. The disciple watched in dismayed silence.

"Ha ha ha ha, close, so close!"

"I *knew* the elder wouldn't eat it. Come, all the leaves belong to me now."

The disciple who'd lost the bet sighed and slumped face-first onto the table. He turned his head to stare at Chu Wanning, anguish written over his face. *Elder, I was wrong; I shouldn't have placed bets on you. Now I'm so broke I can't even afford spiritual stones this month!*

But just as the poor disciple had resigned himself to misery, he saw Mo Ran's elbows shift. That tall, broad frame leaned forward as he said something to Chu Wanning. Then, right before the disciple's eyes, his very own Mo-shixiong once again picked up the beef brisket, this time accompanied by some vegetables, and brought it right to Chu Wanning's lips.

…*What?*

The disciple was stunned—was Mo-shixiong planning to feed the elder from his own chopsticks?!

Chu Wanning was clearly not accustomed to this kind of treatment; he knocked Mo Ran's chopsticks aside with his own, face severe as he said—the words all too easy to read from his lips—*put it down!*

Smiling, Mo Ran set the beef and vegetables down, not into his own bowl, but into his shizun's. What was Chu Wanning to do? He sighed, and, oblivious that he was in full view of a dozen or so rubbernecking disciples, silently ate it all.

A dumbfounded silence descended over the gamblers. None were more stunned than the disciples who'd been so assured of their victory. They watched as the silver leaves slipped out of their grasp.

On the other hand, the heretofore-wallowing disciple was instantly revived. He jumped up, his eyes aglitter as he cried jubilantly, "Ha ha! What a comeback! How the tables have turned! Comrades, my sincere apologies, but I'll be taking those leaves off your hands. Hello money money money, let's do this again tomorrow, ha! Another round tomorrow!"

The master and disciple pair remained blissfully unaware. Mo Ran had his chopsticks in hand, slowly finishing the rice in his bowl as he watched Chu Wanning, head lowered, eat the brisket.

It was warm inside Mengpo Hall; Mo Ran had his left sleeve rolled up above his elbow, revealing a long stretch of

shapely forearm, lean and muscular. The muscle beneath the honey-toned skin rippled as he ladled out a bowl of soup. When Chu Wanning wasn't looking, he dropped a few more ribs into the bowl, allowing them to sink beneath the broth where they would be less noticeable. "Shizun, have some soup. It's good for warding off the cold."

"Is it clear soup?"

Mo Ran blinked innocently. "I think so? I wasn't paying close attention when I got it, so I don't remember."

Chu Wanning examined the surface of the soup, upon which floated some tender green cabbage leaves. It looked quite enticing, so he accepted the bowl and tried a spoonful.

"Is it good?"

"It's all right."

"Then don't waste it, okay?" Mo Ran smiled. "Make sure you finish it all."

Chu Wanning leveled him with mild look. "You're one to talk. Next time, don't fill your tray with so much food that you can't finish it and need me to help you."

"Ha ha, okay. Next time I won't take so much."

Mo Ran waited till Chu Wanning nodded before lifting his own bowl and blowing on its surface to cool it down. The dispersing steam softened the bold lines of his face.

Hot soup was a certain kind of magic. A mere bowl of boiled water with meat, vegetables, and seasoning, but the resulting concoction could warm you right through, from the stomach all the way to the heart. Sharing soup with someone you liked provided a contentment like the wake of a pebble tossed into a lake, ripple after ripple spreading across the surface of the water, scattering the light that fell across it.

Mo Ran unconsciously let out a soft sigh as he basked in the peace he'd worked so hard to attain in this lifetime. It turned out that the ceaseless passage of time, brought to one's lips, tasted like a simple bowl of soup. Once he'd slaughtered ruthlessly for a bowl of soup; now that same dish brought him the bone-deep anguish of regret. He cradled the bowl in his hands and drank it all. Whether it

was the uneasiness in his heart, the uncertainty of the future, or his remorse and guilt, he didn't want to dwell too deeply on it. The good days in his life had been so few that he felt he had to fight tooth and nail for every single one.

It wasn't that he didn't want to savor it, to take things easy. In truth, he was terribly envious of people like Xue Meng, who, by virtue of being born to wealth and privilege, could afford to stroll through life in a leisurely manner. Mo Ran could not afford to be leisurely. His possessions were meager, and what little he had he'd always had to fight for like a teeth-bared beast. And what he managed to win, he always feared would be snatched from him, so he would wolf it down at once. In this, he had retained a primal instinct: he didn't feel secure until the food was in his belly, safe in his stomach. Only then would it truly be *his,* never to be taken away by another.

When he was little, he had fought other kids for food. In his previous life, he had fought the world for power. But in this life, he only wanted to fight for this bowl of soup. He knew full well that he'd done many evil deeds, and he dreaded the inevitable reckoning of fate to come. He only wanted to grasp whatever sorry amount of joy he could and flee with it, leaving fate and its reckoning far, far behind.

He was no different from any other who had committed grave sins and, after seeing the error of their ways, wished to start over. Beneath Mo Ran's perpetually grinning exterior ran a deep insecurity. He knew the saying "as a man sows, so shall he reap" was more than empty words. Whatever quiet moments he had were underscored by a lurking sense that this current peace was a falsehood, a mirage, an illusion—that he would one day wake to find himself back in that empty Wushan Palace, alone in his personal hell.

So he wanted a little more soup before it went cold. This way, even if the evil he'd done caught up with him one day and he was spurned by the world, judged by fate, and shoved once more into the cold depths of the abyss, he would at least have this mouthful of warmth to sustain him on that lonely road.

"What's on your mind?" Chu Wanning asked.

"Ah," Mo Ran said faintly, coming back to himself. He smiled.

“Nothing much, just spacing out now that I’m full.”

Chu Wanning glanced at his empty bowl. “All done?”

“Mn.”

“You seem to really like today’s pork rib soup.”

“Ha ha, yeah.”

Chu Wanning took up Mo Ran’s bowl. “Then I’ll go get you some more.”

He got up, and soon enough returned with a giant bowl of hearty soup, filled to the brim. The bowl was hot, and after setting it down, Chu Wanning touched his fingers to the tips of his ears, warming his ears and cooling his hands at the same time. He sat down once more and said, “Go on, then.”

“Whoa, that’s a lot of soup.”

“Take your time,” Chu Wanning said. “There’s always more if you want it; no one’s going to take it from you.”

This simple phrase was enough to stir Mo Ran’s heart. He cradled the bowl, lowering his inky-black gaze. His voice was a little hoarse as he smiled and said, “Okay.” How could Chu Wanning know that it took everything Mo Ran had to hold back tears as he heard the words—*There’s always more if you want; no one’s going to take it from you*—while holding onto that full bowl of soup.

Chu Wanning had been gone for five years, and Mo Ran had drowned in blame for five years. But now, after all of it, his shizun was telling him *take your time.*

In that moment, Mo Ran’s heart hurt so, so much. The closer he drew to Chu Wanning, the more anguish he felt. It was easy to miss the affection hidden behind so many small actions unless one paid very close attention. But now he was paying attention, and he could see that Chu Wanning treated him so indulgently, so warmly, so well. And to think he had squandered this person in his previous life. What good had Mo Ran done in this life to earn the privilege to walk by his side once more?

His heart quivered, writhing in pain. On one hand, he considered himself unworthy. He thought he should stay far away from Chu Wanning. How brazen he was, to dare smile at Chu

Wanning, try to treat Chu Wanning well. Utterly shameless! Yet on the other, there was a constant yearning in him. Maybe this was okay. Maybe he could just let things be. They had so much left of the rest of their lives; couldn't he slowly redeem himself, atone for his past mistakes, bit by bit? Might this be okay?

I, full of sin and returned from the dead, with these blood-covered hands from my past life, lift up this bowl of warm, rich soup in this one. I would kneel in repentance for the rest of my life, I would go willingly to hell thereafter, if only you would deign to share a taste of it with me.

"Shizun."

Xue Meng had arrived while Mo Ran was lost in thought, pulling him back to the present. Truth be told, ever since Chu Wanning's death, he'd found himself filled with self-reproach and uneasiness, day in and day out. Wallowing like this was bound to give a person a morose and off-putting air. He'd worked steadily to bring his emotions under control, but it was really only in the last year or so that he'd mastered it. Still, once in a while, some small thing would get to him, and a single phrase or incident would send him back into a quagmire of self-loathing. When he lifted his head to look at Xue Meng, his cousin started in fright at the pall of gloom that lingered on his face.

"Sheesh, what's with the long face, you damn mutt? Do I owe you money or something?"

Mo Ran knew he'd slipped. He forced a smile and said, "Food coma, that's all. Were you looking for Shizun? Go ahead and have a chat; I'll head out for some fresh air."

"Hang on, sit back down. This concerns you too."

"Concerns me? What is it?"

Xue Meng gave him a measuring look. "Don't get too upset when I tell you, all right?"

"Just say it, Xue Meng," Chu Wanning said.

"Okay, okay." Xue Meng had wanted to keep them in suspense a little longer, but at his shizun's order he got right to the point: "We just got an invitation to Song Qiutong's wedding."

The color drained instantly from Mo Ran's face. Not because of Song Qiutong's marriage, but rather Xue Meng's imputation. Well

aware of Song Qiutong's character, Mo Ran had kept a wide berth in this lifetime. There was absolutely nothing between them and they had nothing to do with each other.

But Xue Meng… Why did Xue Meng think Mo Ran would be upset at the news of Song Qiutong's wedding? Mo Ran felt like his heart was being crushed in a vise. The fake Gouchen behind all the trouble of recent years sprang to mind: that person lurking in the shadows, that person who was most likely also a reborn soul. Which meant they knew all about Mo Ran's past and every sin he had committed.

Pale-faced, Mo Ran struggled to maintain his calm as he asked, "And what's that got to do with me?"

"What are you playing at?" Xue Meng looked askance at him. "Rufeng Sect delivered the wedding invitation today, and Miss Song went out of her way to send you a personal letter. If you don't know each other, why would she write to you? Mo Ran, it's not my place to comment, but when did you get mixed up with this woman?"

Mo Ran's thoughts roiled, and he felt like thorns were digging into his back. After a good long moment he said, "A letter to me? Could it be some mistake…"

"Nope." Xue Meng produced an envelope from his robes as he spoke and slapped it onto the table in front of Mo Ran. "Here it is written in black and white. *To: Mo-xianjun, From: Qiutong.* There's definitely no mistake."

Mo Ran glanced at that envelope, his heart pounding like a drum. Countless thoughts flashed through his mind. This was indeed Song Qiutong's handwriting—but why would she write Mo Ran a letter right before her wedding when in this life, they had met only a few times, and those by chance?

Xue Meng crossed his arms, looking quite affronted. "Are you planning to open it in your room, or are you gonna open it now so everyone can see?"

Mo Ran eyed him, then turned and saw that Chu Wanning was also looking at him, his straight, sharp brows drawn together.

"Well?" Xue Meng's feathers were ruffled, his pushiness born of his deep disdain toward men and women associating *inappropriately*.

If things really were as Mo Ran feared, then there was no avoiding this… Mo Ran felt faint; even the tips of his fingers were cold as he reached out. Without another word, he took up the letter and opened it.

Chapter 147:
Shizun, Let's Use Our Words, Not Our Fists

INSIDE THE ENVELOPE was a thin sheet of paper inscribed with a few short lines. A brief look, and the heart that had leapt up into Mo Ran's throat settled back into his chest. He let out a discreet sigh and realized he'd nearly sweated through every layer of his clothing.

Xue Meng craned over to look. "What the—" His brow furrowed deeply. "That's it?"

Mo Ran eyed him. "Well, what were you expecting? Didn't I tell you I don't know her well?" Relaxed now, Mo Ran smiled and put the letter on the table. "You made it sound so fishy; I actually fell for it."

During the years Mo Ran had roamed the land, he'd slain plenty of evil spirits of great renown. One such was a carp spirit that had plagued Yunmeng Marsh for many years. Because it possessed strong spiritual powers and its lair was rather remote, more than a few cultivators who'd stepped forward to challenge it were reduced to bones that the carp spirit used to decorate its cave.

Yunmeng Marsh was a place heavy with the essence of evil, fertile ground for monsters to cultivate into spirits. But a carp wasn't that strong a creature; even when cultivated into a spirit, it had no business being so formidable. Mo Ran had exchanged over eighty blows with the creature before finally using Jiangui to strangle it dead. When he'd sliced it open, he solved the mystery.

"That carp spirit had a lunar crystal[9] in its stomach," Mo Ran said with a smile. "It was formed from the essence of a thousand years of condensed moonlight, and makes for a really high-quality spiritual stone—top-notch for forging weapons or to cultivate the spiritual core."

"What does a Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast like her want it for?" Chu Wanning asked.

"She says it's for her husband. He's got a fire elemental spiritual core, and has been training so recklessly these past few

years that there's a risk of qi deviation. She will spare no expense to buy the lunar crystal from me to add to her dowry in order to help her husband suppress the malignant spiritual energy."

Xue Meng nodded. "She's willing to spend so much for her husband's safety? You don't come across a girl like that every day."

Mo Ran laughed. "Isn't it all from Rufeng Sect's coffers in the end? With those looks of hers, all she has to do is bat her eyelashes. Which shixiong or shidi would say no to her? Would you?"

Xue Meng shot him an indignant glare. "Don't make me sound like a freaking pervert."

"Don't get upset, I was just giving an example," Mo Ran said. He returned the letter to Xue Meng. "File it."

At Sisheng Peak, unanswered letters were kept in a box at the library. Xue Meng blinked. "File it?"

"No? Then burn it, if you want."

"No, I mean—" Xue Meng was a little flustered now. "It's her wedding, and all she's requesting is a spiritual stone. It's not like she's asking you to give it up for free. She seems sincere, and she said she'd pay any price, so why won't you sell it to her?"

"It's not that I don't want to; I have no use for it myself. But I already gave it to you."

"To—to me?"

"Yep." Mo Ran grinned and pointed at Longcheng hanging at Xue Meng's waist. "Didn't I send back a crystal for you a few years ago, and tell Uncle to refine Longcheng with it? Longcheng is now much improved, you wield it well, and it's on par with a holy weapon. Guess you should be thanking that carp spirit, huh?"

Xue Meng's mouth hung open, and he couldn't speak for the longest time. He'd only known Mo Ran had obtained the crystal while wandering the world; he'd never cared to learn the details of its origins.

When it came to Mo Ran, Xue Meng had always choked back his resentment. Whether or not Mo Ran was a bad person, whether he had changed for the better, Xue Meng would always harbor a sliver of indignation toward him, a whiff of contempt. When his dad told him the gem Mo Ran sent could be used to upgrade Longcheng,

Xue Meng had been grateful, but he'd also been aggrieved. He felt like he'd received a favor from a rival that he'd never asked for. So he'd put it out of his mind and let his dad take Longcheng to Taxue Palace to be refined. He really hadn't expected the crystal to be a priceless lunar crystal. He was filled with sudden, complicated emotions that he couldn't pin down. It was several seconds before he squeezed out an insipid, "Thanks."

"Don't mention it." Mo Ran waved his thanks away with a smile. "I just happened to have it at the time."

Xue Meng's face scrunched up even more as he retorted, "I wasn't thanking you; I was thanking that dead carp."

"Ha ha ha, then don't eat carp anymore as a gesture of piety to your benefactor, yeah?"

"Hmph!"

In the middle of their banter, a realization hit Mo Ran. He asked with a dimpled smile, "Speaking of which—I was so bamboozled earlier I forgot to ask. Who is Song Qiutong marrying? She's only a little shimei, but there's all this fanfare and Rufeng Sect is sending out invites? Amazing. Is she making a marriage alliance with Bitan Manor?"

"Nah."

"No? I thought maybe Rufeng Sect gave Song Qiutong to that perverted old fart of a sect leader to butter him up," he said, laughing. "Which clan is it then? To be able to talk marriage with Rufeng Sect and make such huge deal out of it… Surely not Taxue Palace?"

"What are you thinking!" Xue Meng shot him a glare. "Why do you think it's a marriage alliance?"

Mo Ran blinked, and his smile froze. "Well, who else would she marry?"

"Nangong Si, duh! Did you forget? That wild horse gongzi of the Rufeng Sect has also reached a marriageable age. And Song Qiutong is so beautiful, it's a pretty good match…"

He was still mumbling when Mo Ran shot to his feet and exclaimed in astonishment, "Nangong Si?!"

Xue Meng startled at his reaction. "What?"

“Why…why is she marrying Nangong Si? How…” Turbulent waves of shock surged through Mo Ran’s mind, leaving him struggling to rescue his calm. He muttered under his breath, “Nangong Si…”

His reaction was not unwarranted. After all, by this time in his previous life, Nangong Si had already died of an illness. Mo Ran had spent the last five years focused on the chaos of war and the refugees, paying no attention to the affairs of the prominent sects. And he cared almost nothing about Rufeng Sect, with which he had little interaction. It wasn’t until this very moment, when Xue Meng announced the imminent marriage of Song Qiutong and Nangong Si, that Mo Ran realized with a start—

This was wrong.

Everything was wrong. The fate of this world was changing, and these changes weren’t just happening to him but even to the seemingly irrelevant Rufeng Sect. A person who should have been dead and buried wasn’t; there was a wedding instead of a funeral, with that living man marrying the empress Mo Ran had taken as his wife in the previous life… He almost choked on the shock of this news. And! Was Nangong Si blind?! To set his sights on *this* woman?

Nevertheless, congratulations were in order, and a gift had to be sent. Nangong Si had extended an invitation to Sisheng Peak, and they had no reason to decline. The wedding was set for the fifteenth of the month. Xue Zhengyong delegated his sect duties and got everything in order. He passed on all business to the Tanlang and Xuanji Elders, then prepared to set off for Linyi.

He didn’t go alone. As per the etiquette of the cultivation world, Madam Wang, Xue Meng, and Mo Ran were also required to attend. Nangong Si had also extended a personal invitation to Chu Wanning, mentioning him by name and expressing that since he’d received guidance from the Yuheng Elder in his youth, he hoped the elder would grant him the honor of his attendance. So he was in the party too.

“Rufeng Sect currently ranks number one among the great sects. It’s their young master’s wedding, so every figure of repute in the world will likely attend to give their well-wishes,” Xue

Zhengyong said. “Sisheng Peak usually doesn’t bother with formalities, but for an occasion like this, we have to behave with utmost propriety or we’ll become a laughingstock.”

“What do you mean, *propriety*?” Xue Meng asked. “I think I’m plenty proper.”

Xue Zhengyong reached out to wiggle his topknot. “For example, this crown of yours isn’t right. You’re wearing a golden crown.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

Madam Wang smiled gently. “Meng-er, this is your first time attending a wedding, so there’s much you don’t know. Mom will explain, so listen carefully: at a wedding in the upper cultivation realm, only the groom wears gold hair accessories. If you go wearing a golden crown, it means you’re there to steal the bride. It’ll be a huge scandal.”

Xue Meng immediately flushed. “S-steal the bride?” he stammered. “No, no no no, I’m not stealing any brides.”

Mo Ran teased, “What if they toss you into a tiny room with Miss Song, you gonna freak out?”

“I’ll toss *you* into a tiny room!” Xue Meng was embarrassed and furious. “I’ll just not wear it, all right?!”

“Seems you guys don’t know much about dressing for weddings,” Xue Zhengyong said. “How about this? I’ll have something made for each of you, so all you have to do is put it on when the time comes.” He paused, then made a point to look at Chu Wanning. He asked tentatively, “Yuheng, is that okay with you?”

Xue Zhengyong wasn’t worried about the others; at worst, they’d make fools of themselves. But Chu Wanning was so accustomed to wearing white that he really might show up to the wedding dressed in it if Xue Zhengyong didn’t remind him. Perhaps Nangong Liu would spit blood in outrage and start a feud between Sisheng Peak and Rufeng Sect.

“Sure,” Chu Wanning replied.

The clothes Xue Zhengyong ordered arrived the night before their departure. They were a rush order he’d placed at a tailor in

Linyi, formalwear of high quality and impeccable style. Even a picky peacock like Xue Meng nodded in satisfaction when he received his outfit.

Holding a neatly folded pile, Mo Ran climbed to the southern summit of Sisheng Peak and came to the Red Lotus Pavilion. He called out, “Shizun, Uncle asked me to bring your clothes over.”

When he came to the lotus pond, he found Chu Wanning practicing the sword. He recalled that Chu Wanning’s second weapon was a sword, but that sword bore a thick killing aura and an impulse to destroy the world. Chu Wanning rarely used it. However, for a blade to stay sharp it must be whetted; skills had to be practiced to maintain proficiency. So even if his own blade rarely saw the light of day, Chu Wanning still trained with ordinary swords every so often.

There under the chilly moonlight, Chu Wanning wore only his white inner robe; perhaps his exertions had left him too warm, and he’d removed the outer one. The silken material floated in the night breeze, making for a nimble, graceful sight. Chu Wanning had discarded his customary high ponytail and instead coiled his hair into a bun, a stern style that accentuated the lean lines of his face so that he looked even sharper than usual. The longsword hummed through the air, its blade cold as snow. Softness hid beneath the strength in his sword dance; his steps were placed with delicate precision, stirring the frost on the ground into drifts gentle as the reflection of the lotus blossoms in the pond. Each strike was lightning quick, like a dragon tearing through the air. Every movement, each advance and each retreat, fell with pinpoint precision. Mo Ran watched him from afar and couldn’t find a single flaw in his technique.

Suddenly, Chu Wanning’s brow stiffened; with one swift, fierce movement, he pointed the longsword at the lotus pond, and the waters of the pond were split in two by the sword’s aura. They stood parted in its wake, as if the very waters had been sliced in twain. He lithely pushed off the tips of his toes, and his graceful form soared between the sundered waters, arms wide and white sleeves fluttering behind him as he landed atop the pavilion on the other side of the pond with all the elegance of an immortal.

“Shizun!”

Afraid Chu Wanning might take off into the distance in the next leap, Mo Ran sped over to the pavilion and called out to him. In the cold, bright moonlight, white petals drifted softly from the massive haitang tree beside the pavilion like fluttering snowflakes. Chu Wanning stood at a pointed corner of the pavilion's roof, the lapels of his robe slightly askew, allowing in a sliver of jade-like moonlight. At Mo Ran's call, he looked down, black eyes bright. He'd yet to catch his breath, which left his lips uncharacteristically flushed, creating quite an enticing picture.

He squinted at Mo Ran, the night breeze tugging at the loose strands of his hair. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to deliver your clothes. Try them on to see if they fit."

Chu Wanning let out a soft huff. At that moment, he remembered that people also hailed Mo Ran as a zongshi now, and that he'd yet to spar with him since awakening. Gripped by sudden impulse, he elegantly leapt to the ground and issued a challenge: "First, spar with me!"

Chapter 148:
Shizun Is a Natural Tease

MO RAN WAS CAUGHT flat-footed; he hadn't expected Chu Wanning to come swinging at him and narrowly dodged the tip of the sword as it brushed past his chest. "If Shizun wants to spar with me, at least try on the clothes first. Uncle is still waiting to hear back."

"Spar first, clothes after."

"This is kinda urgent; the tailor is waiting to make adjustments if anything doesn't fit."

"Come at me, then."

Mo Ran was rendered speechless. This was a quality Chu Wanning shared with Xue Meng—once they became competitive, it was hard to talk them down. In the course of this short exchange, Chu Wanning's longsword had already struck at Mo Ran's vital points several times. Mo Ran only managed to emerge unscathed by virtue of his extensive training; had he been a second slower, he might have been wounded, and his clothes would have been ruined either way.

The sword came down on Mo Ran's shoulder, but Chu Wanning managed to hold back and merely struck him with the flat of the blade. He sneered in cold challenge, "Mo-zongshi, is that the best you've got?"

Cornered like this, unable to so much as put aside the clothes in his arms, Mo Ran smiled ruefully. "Shizun's done going easy on me and wants to bully me instead?"

Chu Wanning's gaze was sharp as the blade, and his swordlike brows drew together slightly. "Did you think I would go easy on you forever?"

"Ha ha, that's true."

"Well, are we doing this or not?"

"Okay, okay, let's spar, let's spar." Smiling, Mo Ran shook his head. A light flared at the tip of his finger. "Jiangui, come!"

Jiangui answered the call, but since Chu Wanning was wielding an ordinary blade, Mo Ran didn't inject any spiritual energy. His hand had barely closed around the willow vine when the sword thrust toward him again. Mo Ran jumped a few steps backward and flicked the willow whip, which wrapped around the hilt of Chu Wanning's sword.

Unfazed, Chu Wanning effortlessly tugged the hilt free with a twist of his wrist. He darted behind Mo Ran, devilishly fast, and held his blade to Mo Ran's throat. Pressed against Mo Ran's back, he said somewhat gloomily, "You weren't concentrating. Again."

Chu Wanning's breath brushed soft and warm against Mo Ran's ear, sending heat surging through him. His throat bobbed beneath the sword's edge as he chuckled and said, voice low, "Shizun, don't be so quick to judge. Look closer and see for yourself if I was concentrating or not."

At this, Chu Wanning realized with a shock that Mo Ran's willow vine had somehow wrapped itself around his arm, firmly restraining him. He was unable to move an inch.

Chu Wanning eyed his arm for a long moment. His eyes lit with a keen flash. "Mn? Not bad, I take it back."

Mo Ran grinned. "No takebacks."

"What do you want then?"

"I want Shizun to try on the clothes."

Chu Wanning hmphed. "Let's see who wins first."

As he spoke, he channeled a powerful jolt of spiritual energy through his right arm, throwing Jiangui off. He leapt back, putting distance between himself and Mo Ran as his sword flashed through the air toward its target. Mo Ran had no choice but to raise his whip to meet the attack. The willow vine and sword clashed in the air. Neither weapon was infused with spiritual energy, so there was none of the usual spectacle of fiery sparks. Nevertheless, every blow was immensely skilled, fluid and precise. One of Mo Ran's arms was still occupied with the clothes meant for Chu Wanning, so Chu Wanning limited himself to using his right hand to spar.

In the blink of an eye, the two exchanged a hundred-odd blows and fought to a stalemate, surprisingly evenly matched. Chu

Wanning's breath came fast and heavy, and a hot line of sweat ran down his sharp, night-black brows, snaking straight toward his eye. Fixated on his match with Mo Ran, he couldn't spare it attention—that droplet of sweat fell past his lashes and straight into his eye. He endured it without blinking, his eyes lit with a terrifying brightness, blazing in the night sky. The Beidou Immortal's combative nature had been thoroughly stirred by his own disciple. He'd always enjoyed the heat of competition, a good, hearty fight. His usual coldness and aloofness in battle were only because he rarely met a good match. But Mo Ran was like a torch, igniting the pool of heady liquor that was Chu Wanning into a roaring blaze, setting the skies alight.

As the fight progressed, the longsword, unable to withstand the force of their strikes, creaked ominously. Finally, as they clashed in midair once more, it gave one last keen and shattered into countless glittering fragments between the two great zongshi.

"Even the sword is broken now," Mo Ran said helplessly. "Do you *still* want to keep going?"

Chu Wanning tossed the hilt aside, eyes ablaze with the rush of battle. The collar of his white robes hung loose, drawing the eye to his tall, slim form. He replied simply: "Yes."

Before the stunned Mo Ran could recall Jiangui, Chu Wanning was lunging at him. He sprang forth like an arrow released from a fully drawn crossbow, like a cheetah in the wild, like a falcon in the snow. Mo Ran scrambled to dismiss Jiangui, then raised his arms to block as the two changed tactics and moved into close, vigorous combat.

Hand-to-hand combat was different from sparring with weapons; the one with the larger build had the easy advantage. Chu Wanning and Mo Ran were evenly matched in skill, but Chu Wanning was at a clear disadvantage this time around. Mo Ran grinned. "Shizun, let's stop here. Without using spiritual powers, honestly, you don't stand a chance."

Chu Wanning snapped in fury, "How dare you! Insolent disciple!"

"Okay, okay. How about this—since Shizun's mad, I'll let Shizun make the first ten moves."

“Mo Weiyu!” Enraged by this humiliation, Chu Wanning’s punches and kicks became faster and more vicious.

Haitang petals swirled around them like a flurry of snowflakes. There under the tree, master and disciple exchanged relentless blows with all their strength. After another eighty exchanges, Chu Wanning found himself flagging. He’d been practicing with the sword for about an hour before Mo Ran’s arrival, then they’d traded over a hundred blows with their weapons. He really was beginning to tire. Yet his eyes were bright, and his heart was racing. His handsome face was aglow with vitality.

The longer they fought, the more entangled they became, locked ever tighter in their struggle for dominance. Chu Wanning twisted sharply, elbow jabbing straight for Mo Ran’s ribs, only to find his arm caught in Mo Ran’s grasp. They strained against each other, their arms shaking with exertion…

Chu Wanning’s arms were held fast in Mo Ran’s grip, the strength in those long, calloused fingers threatening to crush him down, break his bones. Mo Ran’s primal thirst to dominate stirred at their close-contact tussle. With a burst of strength, he finally overpowered Chu Wanning, and then suddenly, with a twist of his arm—

Chu Wanning jerked in shock, but before he knew it, he was firmly restrained in Mo Ran’s sweat-damp embrace.

“Still want to keep going?”

The voice coming from behind him clearly carried a smile. Chu Wanning, heart thumping, could feel Mo Ran’s broad chest flush against his back. That chest was like fire, searing hot and as firm as iron. It was like molten lava, threatening to engulf him whole and melt him down. Mo Ran’s lips were pressed to the back of Chu Wanning’s ear, and his hot breath puffed over the bare skin of Chu Wanning’s nape. With his hair up, there was nothing to shield Chu Wanning from the sensation—from that intimidating, predatory breath, that masculine breath that threatened to tear him apart. Within their hot, dripping sweat, in their physicality, there was the stickiness of limbs entangled, wet as lust…

“Shizun, still wanna keep going?”

Chu Wanning didn’t answer. He bit down hard on his bottom

lip, and the corners of his phoenix eyes began to redden. Fuck, no way was he going to yield!

Just as he was about to wrestle free, Mo Ran's lips moved, brushing across his earlobe in seeming coincidence. Chu Wanning's hair stood on end at the hot, rough sensation, skin prickling into goosebumps, and he ground out through clenched teeth, "Let go!"

Despite his sharp words, his body trembled, softly and uncontrollably, in Mo Ran's arms. How lucky that Mo Ran was tired from all the exertion and couldn't tell why he was shaking. The truth was, Mo Ran was barely keeping himself in check and had no capacity to notice aught amiss with Chu Wanning.

Chu Wanning heard Mo Ran tease in a low, husky voice, in tones one would hear in the thick of desire, "If I let go, will Shizun *finally* go change?"

His phoenix eyes reddened at this provocation. He said sharply, "Let go!"

But his attempt to break away only made Mo Ran tighten his grip, so rough and assertive that Chu Wanning's arm was nearly dislocated. His body went pliant and, despite himself, he let out a hoarse, muted groan.

The sound was too like a moan of the erotic variety. Mo Ran froze, his lower body immediately answering its call. Their bodies were still pressed closely together and, petrified that his shizun would notice the hot and hard arousal pushing against him, Mo Ran instinctively shoved Chu Wanning away, no longer daring to restrain him as he had.

The moment Mo Ran let go, a blindingly furious Chu Wanning spun around, clutching his aching arm, and delivered a vicious roundhouse kick with all his might.

Caught completely off guard, Mo Ran was sent sprawling. He hadn't at all anticipated such a kick and lay on the ground in a daze. His ribs, he thought, were surely broken, and his brows were knit in pain. "Shizun, that's…"

Not playing fair. But he didn't dare finish the thought, only straining to squint up at Chu Wanning through watery eyes.

He beheld his shizun, robes in utter disarray. The white silk of

Chu Wanning's inner robes had been pulled open in their violent tussle, revealing a wide swath of chest, firm and smooth, rising and falling rapidly with his panting. Chu Wanning yanked closed the lapels of his robes as he struggled to catch his breath. Loose locks of hair framed his forehead and temples, and the corners of his eyes were yet tinged red from the exertion of their match.

Chu Wanning slowly straightened, then gave Mo Ran an appraising look from on high. He lifted his chin slightly, and his gaze burned, imposing and proud. He inhaled deeply and said, "What does it matter if you're taller; you still lost."

Mo Ran was caught between laughter and tears. When he spoke, blood bubbled at the corners of his mouth. "You don't say? I think my bones are broken."

Chu Wanning fell into a guilty silence. He'd been so absorbed in the fight that he didn't know if he'd held back with that last kick. He bent to prod at Mo Ran's ribs, asking, "Where did I kick you?"

"Here…"

"Does it hurt?"

Mo Ran looked up helplessly. Of course it hurt! But he was no longer a teenager, and was definitely not about to cry about a boo-boo to his shizun.

When he saw Mo Ran's pale face, Chu Wanning reached out to take the pile of clothes from him with one hand and extended the other to pull him up. He didn't realize how much their sparring had taken out of him—and Mo Ran was tall and strapping to boot. Not only did he fail in his attempt to pull Mo Ran to his feet, he lost his balance and fell right on top of Mo Ran. At the pained groan of the man beneath him, Chu Wanning scrambled upright and began checking him over without thinking. "Are you all right?" he asked, face stricken.

Mo Ran had one arm thrown over his eyes, and his brows were drawn. "Can you get off me first?"

Oh good, he can still talk. Looks like I didn't crush him to death.

He tried to rise. But once a person exhausted their strength, it wasn't easy to get back up after a fall. His legs wobbled, and he ended up collapsing again. It was a sorry state of affairs.

Alas, this time he tumbled directly onto Mo Ran's hips. He noticed nothing untoward at first. But Chu Wanning was currently wearing very little—no more than one thin, silken layer—and this position was rather awkward. The instant he moved, he felt something hard and huge and at the ready beneath him.

Chapter 149:
Shizun, I Can't Get Up

CHU WANNING scrambled to his feet, summoning hitherto unknown reserves of strength. His lips quivered minutely, and his face cycled from blue to white then bright, flushed red. He looked like he'd received the shock of his life—he looked like he was absolutely terrified.

The mighty and powerful Yuheng Elder was actually, genuinely, terrified? Mo Ran's thoughts tied themselves into anxious, uneasy knots as he sat up, clutching his chest that was still throbbing from the earlier kick. Tentatively, he said, "Shizun…"

Chu Wanning took a huge step backward, looking as if he'd just had his tail stepped on. It was frankly impressive how his phoenix eyes were now as round as saucers. It seemed he'd received the fright of his life.

Mo Ran smiled wryly. "Sorry, I wasn't… I…" But he didn't know what to say either.

On the other hand, Chu Wanning's brain was awash with perilous thoughts: *I what? I wasn't what? Why would Mo Ran have that kind of reaction? Or was that not a reaction? But if not, then is it normally that hard and huge? Then how big…* That blasted ranking booklet came violently to mind once more. Specifically, two words. *Absolute unit…* Chu Wanning's face flushed red to the roots of his hair. Seeing that Mo Ran was about to speak again, he jerked his hand up to stop him. "Don't say any more. Go back."

Fearing that he'd upset Chu Wanning, Mo Ran accepted the order. He gritted his teeth in pain as he clambered to his feet. As he knelt, halfway to standing, he paused and mumbled, "Shizun, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

Chu Wanning stared at him, his expression unreadable. Anyone would think he had much on his mind, but in truth it was one giant blank. His brain was snagged on the words *absolute unit* and refused to process anything else.

After Mo Ran left, Chu Wanning stood rooted to the spot for a

long time. All the hair on his arms stood on end, and he stared vacantly into the distance, his body heavy as lead. An incident from when they'd gone to seek weapons at Jincheng Lake unexpectedly flashed to mind. At the hot springs there, Mo Ran had accidentally slipped, and a certain part of his anatomy happened to brush Chu Wanning. But the contact had been brief, and Chu Wanning had been left unsure as to whether or not he'd imagined it.

But this time, Mo Ran had said *I'm sorry, I didn't mean to.* Which meant he'd really…gotten aroused… Chu Wanning hadn't imagined it.

Chu Wanning knew it was perfectly normal for men to become aroused at certain sights, but he honestly didn't think there was anything attractive about him. After all, plenty of good-looking people existed. Surely Mo Ran hadn't found his current sweaty and disheveled state appealing? What could be appealing about that?

Dazed as he was, that goosebump-inducing feeling of something between his legs lingered on annoyingly. Even through clothing, that thing had been so vigorous and frightening. An untimely thought emerged from the tangled mess of his mind: such a ferocious beast… If it were unleashed, who would be able to take it?

Chu Wanning ground his teeth, but the flush on his face refused to subside, and his phoenix eyes were glazed and bewildered. He felt like he was running a fever, burning up.

He stood there for a long interval before returning to his room. There, he let down his hair, holding the ribbon between his lips, and raised his hands to gather his long hair anew into a tight ponytail. He sighed, then raised his eyes to his reflection in the mirror.

His eyes: sharp and narrow, radiating an impression of severity and harshness when not smiling. Unlikable. His nose: bridge too flat, curve too soft, profile unremarkable. Unlikable. His mouth… Forget it. This mouth was too like the words that came out of it—thin, cold, and indifferent, lacking any warmth whatsoever. Naturally, also unlikable. Mo Ran was out of his mind being aroused by this sight.

Chu Wanning had always been stiff and conservative when it came to affairs of the bedroom, and so knew very little. He avoided

all kinds of lewd material, imagining that even an inadvertent touch would sully his hands. He mulled over his reflection for a long time but couldn't figure it out.

Whatever, no point worrying about it, decided the completely inexperienced Yuheng Elder. After all, men's bodies might react even when they weren't aroused. For all he knew it was just a great big coincidence.

The next day, Xue Zhengyong and Madam Wang stood before the main gate bright and early, waiting for the others who would attend the banquet.

The first to arrive was Xue Meng. His favored attire was the blue and silver light armor of Sisheng Peak, in which he cut a dashing figure. Today, however, he wore a solemn and elegant formal robe, and had his hair done simply, adorned with only a jasper pin. He was the very image of an elegant, respectable young man ready for travel, rather different from his usual air.

When he caught sight of his parents, he was a little self-conscious. He adjusted his sleeves before greeting them. "Dad, Mom."

Xue Zhengyong couldn't help himself. "Meng-er looks so good! You and your mom are practically cast from the same mold."

Madam Wang's lashes swept low over her lovely eyes as she blushed at her husband's compliments. She beckoned Xue Meng over. "Come, Meng-er, come over here."

Xue Meng came before her, and she looked him over for a long moment. Something seemed to pass through her gaze, as if reminiscing about a bygone past. Eventually, she sighed softly and said, "This outfit suits you, and it makes your complexion glow. Very handsome."

Xue Meng smiled. "My good looks are all from Mom."

"You're such a cheeky thing though, just like your dad." Madam Wang continued wistfully, "Has it really been more than twenty years…?"

Sensing the direction of her thoughts, Xue Meng's smile froze, and he unconsciously took a step back. But alas, when has a single

step backward ever helped one dodge motherly concern?

Sure enough, Madam Wang placed a hand on his arm and said earnestly, “Meng-er, we set off for Rufeng Sect today to celebrate Nangong-gongzi’s wedding, but you’re of a similar age, aren’t you? Isn’t it about time for you to start thinking of marriage as well?”

“Mom, I don’t want to settle down yet… I don’t even have anybody I like that way…” Xue Meng mumbled.

“Of course Mom knows you don’t have anybody like that yet, so make sure you take note of the young ladies at the wedding. She doesn’t have to be an heiress or a beauty; as long as she has a good personality and you like her, Mom will take care of the rest and get you a matchmaker.”

By now, Xue Meng’s face was red. “Don’t just jump straight to matchmaking without even looking at birth chart compatibility!"[10]

“Your mom’s just thinking about your future…”

“But I’m not interested in anyone. Take the girls that we’ve seen in the upper cultivation realm for example, Mom. None of them are as good-looking as I am. If I married one of them, wouldn’t I be the one losing out? Nope, no thank you. Not a chance.” Xue Meng shook his head like a rattle drum. Hit by sudden inspiration, he added, “Besides, why are you rushing *me?* Mo Ran’s a year older than I am; why don’t you worry about him first? And not to mention my shizun—”

“Are you really comparing yourself to the Yuheng Elder?” Madam Wang chuckled in amusement. “All right, I won’t make you do anything. I’m just saying, maybe keep an eye out. But if there really isn’t a girl who catches your eye, that’s fine too. It’s not like I’m going to tie you up and drag you to the altar.”

Xue Zhengyong, however, gave this suggestion some thought. “Meng-er has a point though. I did bring up the matter of finding a cultivation partner with Yuheng the other day.”

“Huh?” Xue Meng was shocked upon hearing this. “Dad, you said that to Shizun? He didn’t lose his temper?”

“Of course he did.” Xue Zhengyong grinned wryly. “He kicked me out.”

Madam Wang had no words, but Xue Meng burst out laughing.

“See? My shizun is a transcendent being, not a god but even holier. A man like him is beyond earthly desires; what would he need a cultivation partner for?”

Xue Zhengyong sighed, obviously unconvinced. He was about to continue making his point when Madam Wang whispered from behind a raised sleeve, “Husband dear, not now. Yuheng Elder is here.”

Chu Wanning emerged from the morning mist, walking slowly along the dew-damp limestone path, long robes and wide sleeves trailing in his wake. He wore a pale blue robe embroidered with flowers of the silk tree. As he walked, the golden thread embroidered into the robe’s hems glittered as it caught the sunlight. His hair was done up with a white jade pin, inlaid at the end with a ruby carved in the shape of a plum blossom. He was a vision of elegance and dignity, aloof and unaffected.

Xue Zhengyong suddenly felt rather powerless. He opened his mouth, then closed it. *Maybe,* he thought, *Xue Meng is right after all.* Was there any living woman who could stand at his side and not be obscured by his dazzling splendor? Who would not be overshadowed by his imposing grandeur?

This god descended to the mortal realm and stopped before them at the main gate, then turned to Xue Zhengyong with a frown. “Sect Leader.”

“Ha ha, Yuheng, the clothes fit you well, eh?”

Chu Wanning raised a hand, and an intricately embroidered sachet swung in midair. He said, “The scented sachet that came with the formal outfit isn’t quite the same as the usual ones.”

“Ah, it’s tied with Linyi-style knots, what about it?”

This lofty, incomparable god knit his sharp brows and said, “It’s too complicated; I don’t know how to tie it. Sect Leader, can you show me how?”

Xue Zhengyong was rather stunned, but nevertheless proceeded to show Chu Wanning how to tie on the scented sachet. Yet even after three rounds of explanation, Chu Wanning still couldn’t get the hang of it and gave up. Xue Meng, unable to bear it any longer, stepped forward and volunteered his services. In a trice, the scented sachet was neatly hung at Chu Wanning’s waist. Chu

Wanning looked on with some surprise and said approvingly, “Not bad.”

Watching this play out, Xue Zhengyong’s thoughts did a full one-eighty. *Goodness,* he thought, *will someone like him survive without a partner? He can barely take care of himself!*

Mo Ran arrived not long after. He looked rather green around the gills; Chu Wanning had really kicked him pretty hard yesterday, but he’d been too embarrassed to seek medical attention. He would definitely have to explain how he’d gotten the injury, and he couldn’t exactly say he got a boot to the ribs for disrespecting the Yuheng Elder. All he could do was patch himself up by meditating all night, and only now did he feel slightly improved. At least the ache in his chest had subsided enough that he could breathe.

His eyes alit on Chu Wanning, standing quietly beside Xue Zhengyong, waiting for him. Dressed as he was in those pale blue robes stitched with golden thread, with those lapels crossing high on his neck, he looked so austere and dignified, the ideal of a handsome man. Mo Ran felt a pang in his chest, and all the painstaking effort he’d put in last night to be able to breathe went right out the window. Everything fell to pieces again, and he choked out a cough.

This was *awful.* He’d fallen in love with a man who was absolutely off-limits, a man he’d sworn never to touch again. In this moment, he—an old ghost who’d already lived one whole lifetime—really was like a boy in his early twenties, full of youthful impulsiveness and red-blooded vigor. A single glance from the person he liked, a simple change of outfit, was more than enough to flip his world upside down. Everything in the world was connected to that person: his joy, his sorrow, his heartbeat, his breathing. Even the moonlight pouring through the window, the ant crawling along the windowsill, the flower that had attracted the ant, were indelibly tied up in his existence. To Mo Ran, this love was an agonizing, suffocating torment. Every single flower and leaf symbolized *him*, but he couldn’t have them, couldn’t pluck them.

Fuck, the whole world really was out to get him.

After handing sect affairs to the Tanlang Elder to manage, Xue Zhengyong set off with his wife and company. Any group that traveled with Chu Wanning would always travel by carriage, so

long as they weren't in a hurry. This party was no exception. The group took the scenic route toward Linyi, traveling along the main roads and taking the time to dispatch whatever minor monsters and demons they encountered along the way. Their path to Dai City took them nearly two weeks.

Dai City was known for cosmetics, and the moment they arrived, Xue Zhengyong took Madam Wang shopping. Xue Meng, grossed out by the old married couple acting all lovey-dovey, refused to go with them, crossing his arms and rubbing at his gooseflesh. Instead, he followed Chu Wanning and Mo Ran and sat at a tea stall to wait for his parents to finish their business.

The trio took the opportunity to reminisce about the last time they'd visited. "Too bad Shi Mei isn't with us here," Xue Meng said, "or it'd be just like when we came here for weapons six years ago. We could even walk up to Dawning Peak again."

Mo Ran grinned. "Aren't you scared the fake Gouchen is still there, and he'll pull you down to the bottom of the lake to have a nice chat?"

Chu Wanning frowned at the mention of their mysterious adversary. "He doesn't seem to have done much these past five years."

"It's hard to say," Mo Ran replied. "There were several major incidents that went unsolved, all of which involved holy weapons. I suspect he was behind them, but I don't have proof."

Xue Meng toyed with the cup in his hands as he gazed at Mo Ran. "I don't think those cases have anything to do with him. Think about it. Back then, he was searching for a specific spiritual essence. The only reason he kept going after you is because you're wood elemental. If you ask me, he's looking for a person, not a weapon."

"Yet there haven't been any cases of people constantly going missing these past five years," Chu Wanning pondered aloud.

Mo Ran propped his cheek in one hand. "I never encountered any ambushes or traps over that period either. Then again, maybe it's because I never stayed in one place for long, so he didn't know where to find me."

The three fell silent, lost in their own thoughts. They were

interrupted only by the tea stall's mistress arriving with the tea and candied fruit they'd ordered. Xue Meng scratched his head. "Do you guys think that maybe, when he was running around doing all that evil, he messed with something he shouldn't have and did himself in?"

His theory was met with silence. "Don't look at me like that," Xue Meng grumbled. "Doesn't evil magic tend to rebound on the user and stuff? Why else would he have done basically nothing these past five years?"

Mo Ran thought and said, "There's one possibility."

"What?"

"Well, Shizun hasn't done anything these past five years—"

Xue Meng rapped him with his chopsticks. "What's that supposed to mean! Are you implying Shizun is the fake Gouchen?"

"Can you let me finish my sentence?" Mo Ran said in exasperation. "I was just giving an example. If it's true that those unsolved holy weapon thefts have nothing to do with the fake Gouchen, then he really hasn't done anything of note these past five years. Maybe he was like Shizun—for whatever reason, maybe an injury or something similar, he needed to hole up somewhere." But as he said this, something came to mind, and he paused. "Shizun…"

"What is it?"

Mo Ran shook his head, as if unable to believe he was even considering it. After a pause, he eventually mumbled: "Master Huaizui…"

He didn't know what any other powerful cultivators had been up to these past five years, but he *did* know of one who had been stuck in the Red Lotus Pavilion with Chu Wanning the whole time, never once leaving.

Master Huaizui.

The notion was preposterous. After all, Master Huaizui had once been Chu Wanning's teacher. Mo Ran didn't know how his shizun truly felt toward Huaizui, and he didn't dare say too much.

"You don't have to wonder. It's not him," Chu Wanning replied.

His tone was light and indifferent, but unhesitant. Mo Ran immediately nodded. If Chu Wanning did not wish to discuss his past as Huaizui's disciple, then Mo Ran wouldn't press the matter. He picked up his line of thought from earlier: "In that case, are there any other powerful cultivators who haven't shown themselves for the last five years?"

"Guyueye's sect leader, Jiang Xi," Xue Meng answered. "At the Spiritual Mountain Competition, every sect leader attended except him; he claimed sickness. He rarely shows himself."

Mo Ran laughed despite himself. "He's your mom's shixiong, isn't he? You suspect him?"

“Jiang Xi thinks highly of himself and has long been unhappy that Guyueye ranks below Rufeng Sect,” Chu Wanning said. “Ever since Nangong Liu became the leader of the ten great sects, Jiang Xi stopped attending the gatherings. It’s not just for the past five years.”

“Then there’s no obvious candidate,” Xue Meng said, then sighed. “Whatever, forget it. Let’s leave it if we can’t figure it out. There aren’t enough leads; this makes my brain hurt.”

At this juncture, Madam Wang and Xue Zhengyong returned from their shopping. Since it was getting late, the five decided to find someplace to settle for the night.

“I know an inn that’s really good,” Xue Meng said. “It even has hot springs we can soak in.”

Mo Ran froze. It was obvious which inn Xue Meng was talking about—the one they’d stayed in as youths. Back then, when they were soaking in the hot springs, Mo Ran had brainlessly slipped and fallen into Chu Wanning’s arms… At this thought, he cleared his throat and turned aside to hide the gleam of embarrassed anticipation in his eyes. His heartbeat quickened in spite of himself.

Xue Meng was the type who liked to exaggerate. If he liked something, he’d praise it to no end, completely blind to its flaws. If he didn’t like something, he would kill it in one blow with no mercy. But nobody understands a son better than his father. Xue Zhengyong knew better than to take Xue Meng’s words at face value and turned to Mo Ran. “Ran-er, you’ve stayed at that inn before, haven’t you? How was it?”

Mo Ran cleared his throat again, unable to meet his uncle’s eyes. “It’s…indeed, not bad.”

“Well, that settles it, then.” Xue Zhengyong said decisively.

Mo Ran’s palms grew sweaty with guilt, the tips of his fingers twitching in time to the pounding in his chest. He bowed his head, appearing docile and obedient as he hummed in agreement. But inside, he thought: *Maybe…I can go soak in the baths with Shizun again…just like last time…*

He couldn’t help but recall Chu Wanning’s slender, delicate body standing within the steam rising from the baths: the taut,

toned lines of his figure, infixed with an allure that invited violation. If he really bathed with Chu Wanning, could he hold himself back in that hazy steam?

Decision made, the group rose to leave. Xue Meng finished the peanuts he was holding and dusted off his hands as he stood. He glanced down at his cousin, who still sat with an unreadable look on his face. “What’s with you? Let’s go.”

Mo Ran’s expression was cryptic, and his handsome face seemed a little pink, although that might have been from the setting sun. Determined to remain sitting, he reached out and poured himself another cup of tea as he continued to linger awkwardly. He cleared his throat softly a couple times, then said, “We ordered all this; it’d be a waste if no one finishes it. You guys go ahead. I know the way; I’ll join you once I finish this tea.”

Chapter 150:
Shizun and I Swapped Rooms

THIS SMALL TOWN had become famous because of Dawning Peak. But after the affair with the fake Gouchen, in which the weapons of Jincheng Lake had been completely destroyed, visitors to the town had dried up. Many of the inns that had provided accommodation for those who came seeking swords closed down due to the slump in traffic or took up different business. Nevertheless, the inn with the hot springs stubbornly survived. Thanks to Nangong-gongzi's grand wedding, many of the guests coming to Rufeng Sect to attend the reception would settle in Dai City first, and thus the inn had momentarily returned to its former glory.

Xue Zhengyong swept aside the bamboo curtain and stepped into the foyer. "Hey, boss. Here to check in!"

"For four?"

Before he could answer, a low voice from behind said, "For five."

Mo Ran had walked quickly to join them in time. Xue Meng was surprised to see him. "You were done that fast?"

Mo Ran was taken aback. His expression soured, and he thought angrily, *How long does it take for* yours *to go down?* For him, it had been a simple matter of reciting the mind-purification mantra a few times while sitting at the tea stall. But no—he knew Xue Meng wasn't talking about that at all, and he couldn't make a scene, so he nodded quietly.

"You swallowed the melon seeds without even spitting out the shells, didn't you?"

Mo Ran seethed but had no comeback.

"Honored guests, how many rooms would you like for the five of you?"

Xue Zhengyong replied, "My wife and I will share one, plus we need three more of your best suites, so four in total."

Mo Ran was somewhat agitated as he listened to his uncle make arrangements, though he didn't show it. He'd harbored a secret hope that the same thing would happen as in the past, where the boss would tell them that there was no vacancy and they'd have to double up, that way he could…

Forget it. He knew he wouldn't be able to make a move. But the thought of staying in the same room alone with Chu Wanning made his heart burn, unsettled him and thrilled him just a bit. After all, the blood of carnivorous beasts flowed in his veins.

Luck wasn't on his side today, however. This time, the manager quite happily answered, "Yes sir, four of our best suites!" He turned and took four keys from the cabinet, then declared, "Honored guests, second floor, this way please—"

Mo Ran gave him a deep, silent look, feeling somewhat glum. *You dumbass,* he thought, *what's with that happy expression over four rooms? What's there to be happy about! What's so good about making more money!*

"Ran-er, why are you gripping the counter like that?"

Mo Ran silently withdrew his hands and forced a faint smile. Cracks showed on the bottom of the wooden board he had been gripping; had he used any more force, it would've snapped into pieces. "No reason."

After taking his key from Xue Zhengyong and heading upstairs, Mo Ran stopped in front of the door assigned to him with some surprise.

When he turned his head, he saw Chu Wanning looking back at him. "You're staying in that room?"

"Mn… Yeah." Mo Ran hesitated, lashes lowered, then raised his gaze despite himself and studied Chu Wanning with those bright, black eyes. "Does Shizun still remember?"

"Remember what?"

Mo Ran pointed at his door. "That time we came to seek weapons, this was the room Shizun stayed in."

Chu Wanning didn't answer. Mo Ran watched him cautiously. He couldn't conceal a flicker of hope as he asked tentatively, "Shizun, do you still remember?"

Chu Wanning thought to himself, *How could I not.* As he'd climbed the creaking stairs that had long since fallen into disrepair, thoughts of the past had filled him with every step. Memories had floated to the surface, carrying the decaying smell of wood soaked in the passing of ages. He could almost see the young Mo Ran pushing open the door with an irreverent and frivolous expression, cracking a smile at him as he did so. His dimpled grin was light, yet profound with years.

At his long silence, Mo Ran appeared somewhat disappointed, and lowered his gaze. "Maybe I remembered wrong, mixed it up…"

"You're right."

Mo Ran's head shot up.

Chu Wanning gazed at him, then seemed to smile faintly. "You weren't mistaken. It was indeed this room."

His words were a spark that ignited the darkness in Mo Ran's eyes, and the corners of his lips slowly bowed in a sweet smile, as if he'd tasted some delectable candy. He pointed toward the room Chu Wanning was to stay in for the night, and in his joy, blurted out unreservedly, "And the room Shizun is staying in tonight was the one I stayed in last time."

But this only made Chu Wanning embarrassed, and his smile vanished as he huffed indignantly, "That I don't recall." So saying, he pushed open the door and went in, leaving Mo Ran in the hall.

Mo Ran blinked after him. What had he done to upset him this time?

He didn't dare go to the baths to soak in the hot springs that night. Better safe than sorry. Mo Ran felt as though he stood on the precipice of desire; if he were to catch sight of Chu Wanning looking even the slightest bit sensual, he wasn't sure he could remain a gentleman, could resist picking this forbidden cliffside flower. Instead, he lay in bed, arms pillowed behind his head, horribly bored, and mulled over what had lately passed between him and Chu Wanning.

Mo Ran knew he wasn't a very smart person, and that Chu Wanning was like a big white cat. He wanted to treat Chu Wanning well, to take care of this snow-white kitty. Yet every time he tried

to stroke it, he only managed a couple of pets before the white cat's claws swiped at him like he'd rubbed its fur the wrong way. He felt it was his fault, but at the same time, he really didn't know where he was allowed to touch this cat and where he wasn't. He was like someone who had just started keeping a cat; all his knowledge was fragmentary, and he could only think to grab that white cat and lick its fur. And that, in turn, would earn him an angry yowl and a swipe of the claws.

Mo Ran turned over and blinked, feeling rather depressed. Yet it was at this very moment that he realized—with the floorplan of this inn, his bed was pressed right next to the bed of the room next door, separated merely by a single wooden wall.

The instant this thought surfaced, any chance Mo Ran had of falling asleep dwindled to practically nothing. He felt his mouth go dry. Had Chu Wanning taken his bath? Or was he getting ready to? But Mo Ran had barely heard any movement from the next room… If Chu Wanning didn't plan to bathe, did that mean he had already lain down? If so, they were in truth awfully close to each other now, and if it weren't for that thin wooden board that divided their rooms, they would be lying next to each other…

Lying together. The thought alone made the young man's blood boil, surging dangerously like a volcano in shallow dormancy, yet to erupt. Unconsciously, he shifted his body to press firmly against the wall.

A wall made of wood was different from one of brick; after all, wooden planks could only be two or three fingers thick. Mo Ran thought to himself, *Chu Wanning is lying there, mere inches away from me, stripped of his clothes, or perhaps only wearing a thin inner robe…* He closed his eyes and swallowed hard. He could feel his heart burning, scorching his entire body, blazing heat that reached his face, his eyes. His eyes weren't open, but if they had been, they would've been laced with red, bloodshot.

Ah. He abruptly remembered another fact—one so thrilling his entire body went taut, his blood rushing south. He had once jerked off on the very bed that Chu Wanning was now sleeping in.

His memories of years past were so sticky, sinful, and sweet. The recollection sent tension throughout his body. That year, he remembered, he had gone to the hot springs and had accidentally

tripped, falling into Chu Wanning's arms. That feverish heat wouldn't fade no matter how he tried, so he'd given in, rubbing one out with his forehead pressed to the wall, releasing his desire on his own…

Mo Ran cracked his eyes open a slit, his eyes dark as pitch, yet with scarlet lava surging beneath. He once again pressed his forehead to the wall. It felt like his heart would burst. How had he been such a fool? He had blatantly always felt desire and love, so how…had he not noticed…

He placed one hand on the wall. He did try to restrain himself, but he really couldn't. When he didn't know he loved Chu Wanning, he could think of the man and relieve himself without scruple. But now that he'd fallen in love, he was destined to never obtain that man on the other side of the wall no matter how hard he wished. Even dreaming it would feel dirty, like he was defiling Chu Wanning.

Holding back lust by force of will was pure torment for a young body so full of vigor. The tip of his nose brushed the wall as he pushed his feverish body against that flimsy surface, his mind a chaotic mess. His eyes were unfocused, and as passion grew in him, swelling every minute, an illusion took hold. It seemed as if Chu Wanning's breathing and the faint fragrance of haitang that clung to his body had permeated the cracks in the wood's grain, had seeped into Mo Ran's bed, thoroughly enveloping him.

Chu Wanning's scent was enticing him, pitying him. It tempted his beastly desires while pitying his humanity. It lured him to burn in the flames of lust, and pitied him for what he wanted but could not have. Lost in this temptation and pity, Mo Ran's brows drew together in pain and the hands pressed to the wall tensed, showing sinew and bone. But his ruthless expression was belied by his pleas, near sobs, as he murmured softly, "Chu Wanning… Wanning…"

What he didn't know was that on the other side of the wall, Chu Wanning likewise hadn't dared to go to the hot springs for a bath. Just as Mo Ran had envisioned, he had already lain down to sleep. And at this moment, Chu Wanning was also thinking of Mo Ran, yearning for him. He stroked the cool wooden planks with his long and slender fingers, his forehead also pressed to this

heartless wall.

In the past life, the misunderstandings between the pair had been so deep that they had lost their way, had been divided by a tremendous abyss. In this life, they filled that abyss with their blood, turning it into a crimson sea they could sail to each other's side. Yet because of this barrier, they could not see the surging tides of one another's passion, and had no choice but to ride the turbulent, overflowing waves of their own desires.

But they were so close; it was almost as if Mo Ran could hear Chu Wanning's heartbeat, and Chu Wanning could almost hear Mo Ran's breathing.

Someone banged on Mo Ran's door.

Startled, Mo Ran shouted irritably, "Who is it?!"

His shout also startled Chu Wanning next door, who instantly realized that Mo Ran really had been sleeping nestled against the wall, pressed so close that his deep and hoarse voice seemed to have sounded right next to his pillow. He unconsciously clenched his fists, silently opening his phoenix eyes in the darkness.

"It's Xue Meng," came the voice outside. "My mom said she packed my stuff with yours. Open the door, I want to take a bath."

Eavesdropping was obviously not a good deed, but Chu Wanning thought: *I'm not eavesdropping. It's the planks that are too thin, the soundproofing of the rooms that's terrible, it's Xue Meng who's too loud.* Either way, it wasn't like he *wanted* to listen in, Chu Wanning thought as he wrapped the blanket tighter and shuffled closer to the wall.

Next door, the bed creaked, and after a moment the door opened. Xue Meng's voice came again. "Eh? You're already in bed? So early?"

"I'm tired." Mo Ran sounded a little strangled. "Get a move on, you woke me up. Take your clothes and go, go go."

"What's the rush?" Xue Meng paused, then a trace of suspicion colored his voice. "Locking your door so early and holing up in there. I barely said two words and you're getting all pissy; don't tell me you were…"

What? What was he doing?

Chu Wanning's eyes widened, and his mind unconsciously wandered back to when he'd rubbed against Mo Ran's body at the lotus pond. That youth possessed an overabundance of vitality and virility, a lethal potency waiting to strike. As a young man in his early twenties who didn't practice the abstinence-based cultivation method Chu Wanning did…how much roiling lava was concealed under that skin? How often would someone like that have to relieve himself? Chu Wanning didn't know any of that; he had been abstinent for too long. It wasn't something he understood. Now he wanted to know, but this curiosity was held back by his haughtiness and his self-respect. How could someone as proud as he was ask this sort of question? He couldn't possibly pull a random disciple aside and say, *Excuse me, sorry to trouble you. I want to know how many times a week do men in their prime need to relieve themselves?*

Perish this perverted thought.

Of course, Sisheng Peak's libraries contained books related to romance and dual cultivation. But every book borrowed required the borrower to log their name, and Chu Wanning really couldn't imagine the following words appearing on the logs:

The Legend of the Bedchamber Heroes

Tales from the Sensual Sea

Borrower: Yuheng Elder, Chu Wanning

…Death would be preferable.

Chapter 151:
Shizun, I Only Want You

As his thoughts wandered wildly, Chu Wanning heard Mo Ran say in a low voice, “What do you think you’re looking at? It’s not like that, now take your clothes and get lost.”

Xue Meng paused. “Huh? What did I look at?”

Mo Ran went silent.

In the room, Xue Meng stared at his cousin’s face trying to figure it out until it suddenly clicked. He hollered in a mixture of anger and embarrassment, “The hell were you thinking about?! I was gonna say, with your door locked and all, were you just going settle for a bath in here ’cause you didn’t wanna crowd with everyone in the public baths. You’re the one with your mind in the gutter, and you dare to turn it around on me?!”

One room over, Chu Wanning’s face darkened. Mind in the gutter…

Xue Meng heaved a lengthy sigh and looked Mo Ran up and down, glaring the whole time. “I wasn’t even thinking about that, but since *you* brought it up, were you really—”

“Weren’t you going to take a bath? What are you still here running your mouth for!”

“No but, like, I really think you’re acting kinda suspicious.” Mo Ran’s unfriendly tone and his dark eyes, almost crackling with sparks, only made Xue Meng all the more skeptical. “You practically lived at the brothels back when you first came of age, but I’ve heard nothing of your philandering ways while you were traveling around these last couple years. Why’d you turn over a new leaf all of a sudden, huh?”

No reply from Mo Ran. Chu Wanning waited in the silence; he wanted to know Mo Ran’s answer too. The longer it dragged, the more anxious Chu Wanning became. Why wasn’t Mo Ran saying anything? Embarrassment? Remorse? Or…

“You really want to know?” Mo Ran finally spoke, the anger

plain in his voice.

He actually has the nerve to be angry? Chu Wanning was frankly impressed. He thought Xue Meng's question was perfectly reasonable. *Don't get upset just because someone dug up your sordid past and try to sweep everything under the—*

Before he could finish the thought, he heard Mo Ran finally speak. "I had my fill of fucking and got bored of it, all right? Now kindly piss off."

Chu Wanning was dumbfounded. From the silence on the other side of the wall, Xue Meng was the same. The silence stretched for a long, long moment. Then Xue Meng roared, so loud the entire inn probably heard, "Mo Weiyu, you shameless dog! Absolute *scum*!"

"Sure, sure, whatever you say. Now get the fuck out and let me go back to sleep."

"Don't touch me! Gross!"

"How am I gross?"

"Y-you—" In the room, Xue Meng stuttered, his handsome little face bright red. He had tried to put Mo Ran on the spot, but the latter's shamelessness had unexpectedly put him in the hot seat instead. He couldn't help thinking that he was already in his twenties. Among his peers, Nangong Si was marrying the number-one beauty of the cultivation world, the fourth gongzi of Jiangdong Hall was already a father to three children, and that Mei Hanxue of Kunlun Taxue Palace… Mei Hanxue, surprisingly, had yet to die of a venereal disease. It seemed that Xue Meng was the only inexperienced virgin left.

So Xue Meng was indignant. Not for perverse reasons: in fact, he had no raunchy desires whatsoever. But he felt like he had fallen behind Mo Ran in this aspect, and not just by a little, either. So he was outraged. If Mo Ran had avoided the question, if he had been abashed, Xue Meng probably would've felt differently. But Mo Ran had only looked disdainful and impatient as he tossed out a *"had my fill of fucking, got bored."* Young Master Xue couldn't take it; it was too much of a blow to his ego. He stammered futilely for a time before shouting furiously at him, "Anyway, you're gross! You depraved piece of trash!" And slammed the door on his way out.

Chu Wanning was at a bit of a loss as well. He was more collected than Xue Meng and could tell Mo Ran was deliberately provoking him out of irritation. Still, he couldn't help the tides surging in him, the rushing torrents that refused to recede. The man in the other room had used such crude words, spoken in a low snarl like that of a jungle lion, muscles strong and defined, breath steaming. That deep bellow shaping those vulgar words formed a hot, thick fire iron that jabbed right into his heart.

Chu Wanning swallowed, eyes dark and gleaming. Mo Ran had been admonished for going to brothels before, so Chu Wanning was abundantly aware that he wasn't some innocent like Xue Meng. But back then, Mo Ran had not been so irresistibly alluring as to tempt him into giving it much thought, into imagining those kinds of scenes despite himself. Now that it had been brought up again, Chu Wanning couldn't help envisioning that body he'd seen—that steaming, sleek, well-built body in the foggy mist, a body that had once been tangled with those delicate, soft, and lovely boys, had once ravished those fair-skinned youths.

He burned with anger, yet his heart felt tickled as if by a feather. Steeped in rage and yearning, the corners of Chu Wanning's eyes grew red, a tinge of haitang in the black of night…

Xue Meng returned to Mo Ran's room. "Open the door!"

"What is it *now*?"

"I got distracted arguing with you! Where are my clothes!"

"On the table. Get them yourself."

"Hmph!" Holding his clothes, Xue Meng left in a huff.

Things finally quietened down this time. Chu Wanning heard Mo Ran's heavy footsteps, followed by a muffled creak from the bed. This time, he really, unmistakably heard the man in the other room lie back down. He even thought he felt the bed shake as it supported that solid, fiery body.

He felt parched and wanted to get up for a cup of water. But since he could hear Mo Ran lie down, he knew Mo Ran would definitely hear if he were to get up. So he stayed perfectly still, like one of the famous rocks of Mount Danxia, ice-cold on the outside but brilliantly vibrant within.

On the other side of the wall, Mo Ran was restless. Men with unfulfilled needs tended to be irritable, and Xue Meng had to pick that exact moment to pester him. He had lost his head during the bickering and yelled something shameless. He wondered if Chu Wanning had heard. He definitely would have if he wasn't asleep…

The more he thought about it, the more he regretted it, rolling this way and that on the bed. On the other side of the wall, Chu Wanning listened to the creaking sounds and felt his unease grow as well.

A few seconds later, Chu Wanning heard Mo Ran say in a low voice, "Shizun…"

Startled, Chu Wanning froze.

Still unable to settle even after all that tossing and turning, Mo Ran tried calling to Chu Wanning to see if he would respond. "Shizun, are you asleep?"

Of course Chu Wanning didn't reply.

"Can you hear me?"

Chu Wanning's heart beat like thunder. Embarrassed at how loud it was pounding, he quietly tugged the quilt over his head in an effort to muffle the sound Mo Ran couldn't hear to begin with.

"Shizun…"

Under the quilt, with Mo Ran's voice so close, it was as if they were lying on the same bed. As if, were Chu Wanning to lift the covers, he would see Mo Ran's handsome face as he reclined on his side, bare-chested, his cheek propped in one hand as he watched Chu Wanning with those bright, pitch-black eyes of his—those bestial and hungry eyes that threatened to swallow him whole.

"Can you hear me?"

Chu Wanning decided he would pretend not to hear; he knew well that Mo Ran was asking in the hopes that he *couldn't* hear. Otherwise, it would be awkward for both of them tomorrow.

In a low voice, Mo Ran called out to him several more times. When he heard nothing from Chu Wanning's side, he let out a quiet sigh. Thinking Chu Wanning really was asleep, Mo Ran felt relieved, but also a little wistful. He wanted Chu Wanning to pay him attention. But Chu Wanning paid him none, so he could only touch

the thin wall between them, stroking it with calloused fingers, closing his eyes and pretending it was Chu Wanning's chest he was caressing. He pressed his heated lips against it, murmuring softly as if whispering against Chu Wanning's lips.

"I don't want any of that anymore…" Mo Ran said. "I only want you…"

He spoke so softly that Chu Wanning didn't hear at all. Bundled in the quilt, Chu Wanning's heart felt as hot as his face. A few minutes passed, then he heard a loud creak from the bed on the other side of the wall, as if the person on it was very agitated and had rolled over angrily.

He heard him say, "Fuck!"

Chu Wanning suddenly had a feeling, an animalistic sixth sense, that he was about to *hear* something. For an instant, all his hair stood on end; he thought he should cover his ears. But his fingers barely twitched. At a loss, he stared blankly at the underside of the quilt. A moment later, he heard it…

Mo Ran was breathing heavily. There was a rhythm to it, heated and vigorous. Goosebumps rose all along Chu Wanning's arms; the sounds melted his spine and made his back numb. Mo Ran's panting was so sensual and sinful, guttural noises that were stifled yet unbridled at once. These sounds left him with no ambiguity as to what Mo Ran was doing.

Chu Wanning closed his eyes. He felt like he couldn't breathe, his lips parted lightly, trembling. He remembered that erotic dream he'd had so many times before. In it, he'd seen Mo Ran's entire body exposed, nothing left to the imagination. Shutting his eyes only made it easier to imagine what was happening outside the cocoon of his quilt. It was as if Mo Ran was lying on his back right next to him, firm, toned body stretched out, light dancing in those dark, narrowed eyes… Mo Ran's hand reached down and unfastened his trousers, and that potent length sprang up. Chu Wanning didn't dare think too deeply about what that massive thing would look like, how swollen and red it must be, leaving it as a rough silhouette in his mind. Mo Ran's hand worked over that lethal object, the jut of his throat rolling with every swallow. There was no telling of whom he thought as he stroked his own cock feverishly, painfully.

“Nngh…”

At the low groan from the other side of the wall, husky and sensual, Chu Wanning’s scalp went numb, those phoenix eyes hazy with lust in the darkness. He, too, could no longer bear it…

After a long, torturous moment, the Yuheng Elder’s fair, slender hand finally reached down and, trembling, took hold of his own burning arousal.

That heft of it in his hand, hot and thick, brought both shame and pleasure. His head tilted back ever so slightly and he suppressed a gasp. Under the cover of the quilt, he relinquished that exterior of cold virtue and drifted in the sounds of Mo Ran’s heavy breathing, allowing himself to be dragged down into the ocean of desires. He handled himself roughly and clumsily, even hurting himself several times, until he really couldn’t take it anymore and abruptly flung off the quilt. He got on top of it, rubbing and grinding against its fabric, long, slender legs trembling uncontrollably, phoenix eyes half-lidded behind loose strands of sweat-soaked hair, lips parted as he panted soundlessly.

Perhaps being suddenly exposed to the open air made the noises clearer, or perhaps the heady arousal made the noises blurrier, but he seemed to hear the sound of something slick. He thought it was coming from Mo Ran’s side beyond the wall, but when he looked down, he saw that his hardness was leaking at the tip, smearing across his hand and making those unbearably lewd sounds.

Chu Wanning felt his cheeks blaze with heat. He turned his head away from the wall so that it would feel like Mo Ran was lying naked beside him, and they were stroking one another in mutual pleasure. Loftiness and reservations were left behind in his lust-addled state, and all he knew was the harsh breathing from across the wall and the intoxicating friction beneath his body. His lack of experience left him defenseless against carnal stimulation, and every inch of his skin felt aflame. Just as a well that stood dry for a hundred years longed for water, Chu Wanning craved the touch of another warm body.

As the pants from across the wall quickened, Chu Wanning felt his heart burn and his body grow pliant; his legs were on the verge of giving out. The sheets beneath him were already wet with fluid. Blearily, he thought that this was all so ridiculous, that he really shouldn't. But he couldn't help it; it felt too good. In all his years he'd never tried doing this, didn't even know that anything could feel this pleasurable.

When he'd gotten himself off in Yuliang Village, he had been tormented over breaking his abstinence for the first time, had loathed and been disgusted by himself. But this time… Across a wall from the person he liked, listening to the stifled sound of that person's heated breathing, he suddenly no longer found these carnal matters so ugly. He allowed himself to float in the ocean of desires, to feel pleasure rather than revulsion.

A few errant locks of hair fell over his teary, heavy-lidded eyes. His gaze lost focus, and for some reason, a bizarre vision flashed before him. Or perhaps not a vision, but the strange, all-too-realistic dream he'd had in the past.

The bedding in the dream had been red and gold, with an animal pelt spread on the sheets that he could practically smell. He'd been face-down on that bed, as he was now, forehead sheened with sweat, lips slightly parted, hair similarly undone and loose over his eyes.

The candle had been left burning, and the man behind him drove into him, fast and rough, their legs tangled. He could clearly feel the man's body, muscles taut with pleasure. The sheets and blankets were in disarray. The man panted sensually and hoarsely as he thrust in and out, and Chu Wanning could hear him say, "What're you holding back for? Make some noise for me."

Dream overlapped with reality. Chu Wanning gritted his teeth and tilted his face away, refusing to make a sound even as the heat built low in his belly and his need grew until it was nearly unbearable.

He closed his eyes, and his hand below moved yet more roughly.

He closed his eyes, but couldn't unsee those erotic dreams.

The man thrust in a few more times, then cursed under his breath and pulled out. He forced Chu Wanning to turn over, and in the candlelight, Chu Wanning saw a handsome, lust-filled face. Mo Ran's face.

Seeing Mo Ran so clearly in the dream only intensified Chu Wanning's arousal and torment. He shook his head in shame, trying to free himself from the vision. But it was useless. He heard Mo Ran's panting across the wall. Low and throaty, just like the cruel yet tender man in those dreams.

Despicably, Chu Wanning recalled further details of that dream. Mo Ran, flipping him over and pressing his still-wet cock to Chu Wanning's entrance, which was clenching down spasmodically, uncontrollably, from such thorough use. Its massive head rubbed against his opening, dipping in enough to tease but no further.

Within the inn, Chu Wanning's other hand fisted tightly in the sheets. Shameful. It was too shameful. How could he possibly dream something like that? He'd never… He'd never looked at any of *those* things…so how could he dream so vividly of such affairs, as if his body really had experienced such fevered yet frenzied, ugly yet intimate encounters? Could this be the bestial nature carved into the bones of every human?

In the dream, Mo Ran's eyes shone, his expression sinister and avaricious. "Holding out on me? You really think biting through your lip to keep quiet will save your purity? I've fucked you so many times; what's the point in struggling? You're the one who willingly let me fuck you, you're the one who willingly submitted to me…"

"Stop…" Chu Wanning murmured, both in the dream and in reality.

"So what if you're noble and virtuous? You were still dirtied by me in the end. Didn't you take me into your mouth and suck me off, didn't you spread your legs and let me fuck you, wasn't what leaked out from between your legs my gift to you? *Pure*? Don't be stupid. That word has never applied to you since the day I bedded you."

"Stop talking…"

Pure no longer. Pride ripped apart like his robes.

“You should see what you look like down here…” Mo Ran’s gaze dragged downward, like a dagger eviscerating the man beneath him, until his eyes landed on that quivering, clenched hole, still sticky from their earlier union, traces of blood visible amidst the other fluids. His eyes darkened and the jut of his throat bobbed as he swallowed, then he swore under his breath and took his engorged cock in hand. He pushed slowly into that twitching entrance, stretching it ruthlessly open, inch by quivering inch.

It was strange, but lost in his memories of that dream, Chu Wanning felt as if he really could feel a thick, hard staff of flesh tearing him apart, filling him…

Mo Ran sank all the way in, so deep his balls were pressed tightly against Chu Wanning’s entrance, as though he wanted to shove them in too. His massive length filled Chu Wanning to his limit, pulsing inside him; he was sure he couldn’t take one bit more of this violation.

“*Ah…*”

Was it in the dream, or in reality? A moan finally escaped his throat, jolting Chu Wanning out of his trance. The mirage dissipated in an instant, fading like mist. The last thing he saw was Mo Ran driving into him, fast and rough, the two of them fucking frantically atop the bed as he heard Mo Ran say between heavy breaths, voice raw and heated, “If you were a woman, I would’ve knocked you up long ago, the way I fuck you like this every day… *Heh*, our child would be quite the abomination, don’t you think?”

Shame, arousal; beastly desire, human nature.

Inside the inn, Chu Wanning turned over, trying to shake himself free of the filthy scene in his mind. He felt aggrieved, and the rims of his eyes were tinged with red—why was this happening? He never used to have dreams like these. He’d never looked at anything he shouldn’t, he’d never even *seen* a pornographic drawing, so why should he have such ridiculous, wanton dreams… What would he do if anyone were to find out?

The memories of that dream receded, but the bed in the other room suddenly began to rock. Mo Ran had been working over his cock for quite a while before Chu Wanning had even begun; the heat had been building this whole time, and he was so close to the edge. Mo Ran couldn’t help but buck his hips, thrusting upward.

He'd gone without for so long that when he came, it was with a low, guttural roar.

The muffled sound sent heat spiraling down Chu Wanning's spine. Eyes teary and red-rimmed, he stroked himself roughly and followed suit soon enough, coming all over the bedding. He'd never experienced such an intense climax, and he couldn't help the low shout that tore itself from his throat as he came, gasping, "Nngh… *ahh*…"

His vision blurred with his release. Chu Wanning couldn't understand how he'd managed to fall into this sticky, messy love. Unable to summon any strength, it was all he could do to lie there, eyes unfocused as he panted quietly.

He rejected carnal desires. But he'd willingly fallen in love. And when desire and love wove together, passions of the flesh seemed less unacceptable. So his response this time was different from the frustration and despair he'd felt in Yuliang Village. The shame was still there, but it was washed away by the tender feelings in his heart, drowned by pleasure and arousal. Chu Wanning suddenly wanted nothing more than for that wooden wall between them to vanish. He wanted Mo Ran, sweat-soaked and panting as he was, to reach over and press his hot, heaving chest against his back, to kiss his shoulder and mouth along his neck.

As he lay there limply, staring off into space, Chu Wanning thought that, if only this were so, then everything would be perfect. He would be content.

Mo Ran rose early the next day. He knew that this was Linyi, and Chu Wanning wouldn't like the food here. The inn didn't offer much in the way of mild dishes, so he set off for the western market and bought some ingredients, intending to borrow the inn kitchen to personally cook a few things for his shizun.

There were some men who pulled out all the stops to woo someone, who might cook a full banquet for breakfast, but who would give up and walk away at the first sign that their affection might not be returned. There were so many beauties in the world; why waste time on someone they had no chance with?

Mo Ran wasn't like that. He'd spent two lifetimes chasing after

Shi Mei. He finally understood his own feelings, and he also understood that, in this lifetime, he and Chu Wanning would never be more than master and disciple. Even so, he wanted to care for Chu Wanning every day.

To be perfectly aware that something was impossible but to go ahead and do it anyway—in this, Mo Ran had never changed, in life or in death.

"Gongzi, out shopping so early? Check out my fresh radishes, why not buy some?"

"Gongzi, I have all sorts of jewelry here, bracelets, necklaces, hairpins, and accessories, you name it! They're all finely made."

"Come look, come see, all kinds of spiritual stones and weapons, come, come—"

Mo Ran had only planned to get some groceries, but as he passed a general store with his basket full of vegetables, he saw a row of pretty little trinkets laid out on a stand. One in particular caught his eye, and he found himself wandering over before he knew it.

Another man stood near the stand, the hood of his cloak pulled up as he looked over the glittering goods on display. The man lifted a hand, revealing smooth and lovely bone-pale fingers beneath loose black sleeves.

It was these delicate fingers that drew Mo Ran's attention. Based on the person's build, he'd taken them for a man, but the slenderness of that hand made him think they might be a woman instead. Curiosity drove him to try for a better look at their face, but it was shrouded by a veil of black silk. Only a pair of cold eyes were visible, obscured by the shadow of the cloak's voluminous hood.

Their eyes met. Out of habit, Mo Ran smiled.

The cloaked person swiftly retracted their hand, which had been reaching for a spiritual stone on the stand. From the corner of his eye, Mo Ran caught a glimpse of a ring on that pale thumb. It was patterned with a silver serpent covered in intricate scales.

He felt he'd seen this pattern somewhere before. But just as he went to take a closer look, the person tucked their hand back into

their sleeve. They cast Mo Ran an indifferent glance, then turned and left without a word.

"What a weirdo…" Mo Ran muttered. Then again, Rufeng Sect's young master was getting married, and wedding invitations had been sent out en masse. All sorts of peculiar people had been gathering in Linyi of late, so it wasn't so strange to see someone cloaked from head to toe on the street.

The wind chimes hanging from the store's back door rang, and the curtain rose and fell as the shop's mistress came out. Mo Ran mentally discarded the matter of the black-robed person and pointed at an enchanted item on display, smiling as he asked, "How much for this one?"

Chapter 152:
Shizun, Look! It's Mei Hanxue!

THE SHOPKEEPER was preparing to open for the day and had just released the door bolt with a yawn and a languid stretch. Her bleary eyes beheld a tall, handsome stranger standing at the entrance to her store, bathed in the light of the morning's brilliant sun.

An individual of such elevated bearing, tall and straight as a mighty pine, ought to be carrying a blade and walking coolly through the city streets, heedless of all around him. But this dashing man was smiling brightly, all soft dimples and gentle, thick eyelashes. In his arms was a bamboo basket, filled not with spiritual stones or cultivation scrolls, but fresh fruits and vegetables—vibrant red apples, plump white radishes, and verdant green celtuce, leaves dew-laden as they peeked over the rim. Light danced off the crystalline droplets and reflected onto his handsome face.

The shopkeeper froze mid-yawn as she stared blankly at this vision of tender masculinity standing before her. She blinked, but stood dazzled for some moments.

"Ma'am?"

"Yes! Hello, what would you like?"

"These." Mo Ran picked up a pair of pale red crystal pendants. "How much?"

"Gongzi has fine taste; these pendants are made using top-grade dragonblood crystals and crafted by artisans at Kunlun Palace. The materials may not be the most precious, but the pendants themselves are quite special. The red color of dragonblood crystals, as I'm sure you know, becomes more vibrant as the wearer's body temperature rises…"

The shopkeeper paused to smile before continuing, "Since Xianjun picked out a pair, one must be for your dual cultivation partner? Aiyo, I wonder what lady was so lucky as to claim your affections. Definitely get these, I guarantee you won't regret it. It'll certainly spice things up if you both wear one while dual

cultivating."

Mo Ran had been drawn to the pendants because dragonblood crystals had a warming property excellent for people predisposed to catching cold; such a thing would be perfect for Chu Wanning during the winter. But his heart skipped a beat at shopkeeper's words. He imagined how Chu Wanning would look, dazed by pleasure with that pendant swinging from his neck, glowing scarlet from the heat of its wearer's body, red as a bead of blood quivering at the tip of a blade.

He cleared his throat. "I'll take the pair. Please wrap them up for me."

In order to not arouse Chu Wanning's suspicion, Mo Ran bought gifts for Xue Meng, Xue Zhengyong, and Madam Wang as well. When he returned to the inn, he put down his bundles and withdrew the small paper packet holding the dragonblood crystals from inside his sleeve. The droplet-shaped pendants had already turned crimson from the heat of his body. He picked one to leave in the package and hung the other around his neck. Then he straightened his collar, making sure the pendant wasn't visible, and re-wrapped the other. As he patted at his lapels, he noticed his heart was beating a little fast. After all the preposterous things he'd done in his past life, he was surprised to find himself flustered over a small secret hidden under his clothes.

"For me?"

Over breakfast, Xue Meng held the sword tassel Mo Ran had given him, looking like he'd seen a ghost. "What're you giving me this for? Trying to make up for yesterday?"

Unaware that Chu Wanning had been awake and overheard last night's exchange, Mo Ran remained perfectly calm, not batting an eyelid. The same could not be said of Chu Wanning. He grabbed his cup and gulped down a few mouthfuls of cold tea in an effort to cover his unease while he schooled his expression into one of neutrality.

Mo Ran replied with a grin, "What d'you mean? You're the one who started it. I grabbed the tassel because it looked nice and I thought you'd like it." He paused, then added, "We rarely travel together like this, so of course I gotta buy some souvenirs. I got things for Shizun, Uncle, and Aunt as well. Just some trinkets,

nothing expensive."

"Us too?" Madam Wang seemed quite surprised.

"I got Aunt an agarwood cosmetic box, and a pendant for Uncle's fan." Mo Ran handed out their gifts as he spoke. "And this, for Shizun." He handed Chu Wanning the dragonblood crystal pendant.

Chu Wanning eyed the red crystal. "What is it?"

"A pendant." Mo Ran's palms felt hot and sweaty. "Dragonblood crystals are a product of Linyi and have warming properties, so I got one for Shizun to keep warm."

The crystal was inexpensive but useful, so Chu Wanning accepted. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it. Won't Shizun put it on?"

Chu Wanning glanced over at Mo Ran but did not see through his disciple's selfish, intimate motive. He put it around his neck without a second thought. The pale red crystal glistened brilliantly. Xue Meng, watching all this, piped up, "That looks nice, better than my tassel. Where'd you get it? I want to buy myself one too."

"They don't have any left," Mo Ran replied. "They only had one in stock, I couldn't even get one for myself."

Disappointed, Xue Meng picked up his sword tassel and looked it over, then turned to look at Chu Wanning's pendant once more, mumbling, "No way, this stuff's supposed to be common in Linyi. I'm gonna ask Nangong Si when we get to Rufeng Sect, I bet he has a whole mountain of it…"

Mo Ran paid him no mind; he was too busy watching Chu Wanning. He was antsy; Chu Wanning hadn't tucked the pendant inside his clothes next to his skin but left it hanging on the outside instead. After biting his tongue for a while, he said, "Shizun, the pendant isn't meant to be worn over your clothes."

"Hm?"

"You have to put it inside." He leaned over to tuck the pendant in for Chu Wanning. But he moved too close, too fast; the heat of his breath burned Chu Wanning's ear, and he was unceremoniously shoved away.

Chu Wanning's features were cold and stern, lashes lowered over downcast eyes. But Mo Ran had gotten a close look this time—Chu Wanning's ears were pink as a haitang blossom, pitiful and adorable. Mo Ran wanted to kiss one, to put that trembling petal between his lips and suck. But he was also somewhat surprised: Why was Chu Wanning blushing? He hadn't done anything inappropriate; was arranging the pendant for him such a big deal?

As he mulled it over, he suddenly remembered the words he'd just spoken. *You have to put it inside.*

Mo Ran momentarily froze, and his face turned red as well. If not for his tanned complexion, he'd probably be even redder than Chu Wanning. He *swore* he hadn't meant anything suggestive when he'd said that…

Then astonishment set in. If even *his* mind hadn't gone to the gutter, then how had Chu Wanning's, with all his propriety? No matter how he thought about it, he couldn't figure it out. Even when Chu Wanning, ears pink and face glum, stuffed the pendant into his clothing without a word, Mo Ran was still none the wiser.

That wooden wall, no thicker than the width of a few fingers, had blocked Taxian-jun from so much the night before. He'd missed the ripening of the first haitang fruit of spring, missed a Chu Wanning made of flesh and blood, who'd stumbled into the muddy swamp of carnal desire. He knew nothing of what had happened on the bed on the other side of the wall; he didn't know that this morning's Chu Wanning was still caught in yesterday's mire, heart throbbing with his love-born desire and filled with shame because of it, overly sensitive because of it. Still haunted by his dream and the filthy words contained therein, still desperate to suppress evidence of that vision, Chu Wanning had uncharacteristically read dirty thoughts into such a simple sentence.

Chu Wanning looked up and shot Mo Ran a quick glance. His chest felt a little hot; he must still have an excess of internal heat from yesterday. He reached for the handle of the teapot, only to be beaten to it by Mo Ran. "Don't drink so much cold tea; it's bad for your stomach."

Chu Wanning said nothing, but stared at him with his hand outstretched, indicating that he'd like the cold tea anyway, thank you.

“I’ll get you a cup of hot tea instead.”

“There’s no need…”

But Mo Ran had already gone to find the shopkeeper, returning after a few minutes with a pot of fresh-boiled tea which he poured into a cup for Chu Wanning. “Here you go, Shizun.”

“He’s right, Yuheng, you should drink your tea hot. Cold tea really isn’t good for your health,” said Xue Zhengyong.

Chu Wanning had no choice but to accept the steaming cup of tea. He blew on it a little, then set it down without taking a sip. His insides were hot enough. Any warmer and he feared that last layer of thin ice in his gaze would melt and allow his unrestrained lustful feelings to overflow. He feared that, if their eyes were to meet, there would be no way to hide his embarrassing thoughts. And if that were to happen, how could he, the Beidou Immortal, face anyone ever again?

As they finished breakfast and got ready to leave, a new group came in. At their head was a man wearing a thick, sky-blue cloak with a scrollwork pattern, his face hidden under the hood, inconspicuous within the group. As he set foot inside the inn and saw Xue Zhengyong, however, he broke away from his party and came over to make a formal salute. “Greetings, Uncle Xue.”

“Who…”

The man pushed back his hood. Xue Meng let out a small sound of surprise and took a big step back. Xue Zhengyong laughed. “Aiya, if it isn’t Hanxue!”

Mei Hanxue lifted his face. His skin was fair, and with his high nose bridge and defined brows framing deep-set eyes, he possessed an exotic handsomeness that set him apart from the rest. His skin glowed even in this dimly lit space. He had been raised in the frigid lands of Kunlun, and his features carried the chill of frost and snow, giving him an air of cool detachment and keen intelligence.

Simply put, based on looks and mannerisms alone, no one would believe *this* was the infamous philanderer, Mei Hanxue.

“There were some matters to take care of back at the sect, so I’ve only just arrived at Linyi. I didn’t expect to see Uncle Xue here.” Mei Hanxue’s looks were so naturally cold that his eyes were

frosty even as he smiled politely, and his gestures of respect had a coolness to them. “So I came over to greet Uncle and Aunt.”

“Very good, very good. Aiya, if only Meng-er had your manners.”

Xue Meng was less than pleased to hear this. He glared daggers at Mei Hanxue from where he stood at the back, the venom in his gaze only growing.

This damnable Mei Hanxue! Xue Meng thought to himself. *So freakin’ two-faced!* This sleazy scoundrel would do anything and anyone, male or female, dead or alive. He had even tried to grope *Xue Meng* back at Peach Blossom Springs. But look at him now, acting prim and proper like some enlightened monk in front of his elders. What a poser!

Mei Hanxue didn’t glance even once at his childhood playmate. His gaze remained fixed, and his lips barely moved as he spoke, the very image of propriety. “Uncle jests. Xue-gongzi is the darling of the heavens and the winner of the Spiritual Mountain Competition. I’m sure he is outstanding in other respects.”

“That’s right, Dad, I beat this guy before, you know—”

“Meng-er…” Embarrassed, Madam Wang tugged at Xue Meng’s sleeve. The irascible little phoenix reluctantly subsided, though he continued to mutter under his breath, puffing fire from his nostrils.

Mei Hanxue asked, “Is Uncle heading up to Rufeng Sect?”

“Well, it’s about time. There’s no harm getting there a little early; if nothing else, Nangong Liu has an abundance of rooms to spare. Didn’t he say something about turning the whole city into guest lodging for the months before and after the wedding?” Xue Zhengyong said with a laugh. “We’re gonna head over first. That way the youngsters can spend some time getting to know each other too.” At that, he glanced over at Xue Meng, his matchmaking intentions none too subtle. Xue Meng abruptly went quiet. “Is Hanxue not going straight to Rufeng Sect?”

“I have some errands to run for the sect master and I need to purchase a considerable number of spiritual stones, so I’ll be staying in Dai City for a few more days. It won’t be too late to arrive the day before the wedding.”

Xue Meng muttered under his breath, “Yeah, right. You’re just afraid of arriving early and getting beaten like a dog by all the girls from every sect whose hearts you’ve played with.”

“What was that, Mengmeng?” Mo Ran, who had been listening, teased. “Something about a dog?”

Xue Meng hmphed and crossed his arms. “Nothing, I was reciting cultivation scripture.”

“Pfft, sure, the Mei-be-gone scripture.”

“You shut up!”

At the sound of their bickering, Mei Hanxue finally deigned to glance over. Their eyes met, and Xue Meng paused.

Something was *off* about Mei Hanxue; he was acting completely weird. When last they’d met, it’d been at Peach Blossom Springs, and that sleazy playboy had been shooting seductive glances in every direction. His eyes had seemed like they’d smile even when angry. But the eyes of the person in front of Xue Meng now had not even the slightest inclination toward flirtation, much less any seductive glances to shoot. His gaze was icy cold, logical, and admirably restrained. *These* eyes seemed like they’d be angry even when smiling.

Xue Meng blinked, rooted in place as he recalled how Mei Hanxue had led the disciples of Taxue Palace in battle at the Heavenly Rift, the way he had acted so serious in front of everyone. He couldn’t help the flash of anger that burned through him. How was this guy so good at pretending? How did he fake it so well? This duplicitous beast! This scum in gentleman’s clothing!

“Hey, Meng-er, where are you going?”

“It’s too stuffy in here! I’ll wait outside; don’t come out till you’re done chatting!” With this, Xue Meng strode toward the door, flipped the curtain, and left in a huff.

The poor darling of the heavens was far too vexed. He really didn’t get it—the whole damn room had that sleazy stink. How come no one else could tell? Infuriating!

Chapter 153:
Shizun's Most Hated Sect Leader

MAD AS XUE MENG might be, the group from Sisheng Peak still needed to be on their way. After bidding farewell to Mei Hanxue, they left Dai City, heading north and traveling for an hour until they arrived at last at the foremost sect in the world: Linyi Rufeng Sect.

Rufeng Sect, as its name implied, was situated within Linyi. Within this vast city were seventy-two manors of varying sizes, built in a continuous stretch. Each manor oversaw its own massive estate, so large that it would take an hour to travel across it on horseback. In fact, each of these manors was considered a city in its own right. The seventy-two cities of Rufeng Sect each had their own duties and clear-cut rankings. It was worlds apart from the hodge-podge melting pot that was Sisheng Peak; the two were in different leagues. Even Xue Meng, who despised the people of the upper cultivation realm, couldn't help his astonishment as he stood at the entrance to the cities. Rufeng Sect was said to be the epitome of the elite, privileged, and upper-class. It seemed truer words had never been spoken.

The city they'd arrived in was the main city, which was also the largest metropolis within Rufeng Sect. Its buildings, white-walled with black-tiled roofs, extended toward the skies, and the gates on the cardinal walls of the city were each flanked by towering, lofty watchtowers on each side. The main city gate was painted red and adorned with gold, and its road was at least fifteen feet wide, a grand thoroughfare that stretched into the distance, and which was paved with qi-refinement stones. With this, one could accumulate spiritual power by simply standing on the road. Although the effect of each individual rock was minimal, enough grains of sand would amass into a tower. Each one of these rocks cost over a thousand gold.

"Must be nice being rich…" Xue Zhengyong marveled.

Madam Wang chuckled. "If you had the money, would you also pave a qi-refinement road for Sisheng Peak?"

“Nah, I would pave a public square in every village in the lower cultivation realm. These rocks are full of spiritual power and can ward off minor ghosts and monsters. If every village had a square like this, its people would have a safe place to shelter during an attack till our disciples could get to them.” Xue Zhengyong made some tallies on his fingers, then shook his head. “Too bad we can’t afford it.”

“Sisheng Peak…” Xue Meng sighed along, “*is* a little poor.”

“Mm-hmm.” Xue Zhengyong nodded weightily. “We’re all cultivation sects, yet Rufeng Sect is so rich…”

At this point, Chu Wanning, who had kept silent until now, spoke up. “Sect Leader, do you know how much Rufeng Sect charges to send out regular disciples for an exorcism?”

“I’ve never asked. How much?”

Chu Wanning raised four fingers.

“Four hundred silver?” Xue Zhengyong’s eyes were wide. “So much?”

“Four thousand gold,” Chu Wanning replied.

Xue Zhengyong gaped, speechless.

“The upper cultivation realm is full of wealthy merchants, so money is easy to come by. How can you compete with them when you only charge eighty silver per request? Not to mention the requests for which you don’t accept payment at all.” Despite his blunt words, Chu Wanning’s eyes were gentle. “Come. Let us enter the city.”

There was an accepted etiquette for prominent sects to receive guests, and the reception committee for Rufeng Sect had been waiting at the city gates for the past few days. Though they greeted all entrants with welcoming smiles, they were well aware of the status and reputation of each arriving party. For rogue travelers and small-time cultivators, the reception committee would give them a tour of the city, then guide them to their assigned rooms. Minor sects would be received directly by the warden who was in charge of such things.

When it came to Sisheng Peak, which had recently risen to become one of the ten great sects, Rufeng Sect’s reception

committee didn't bother posturing. They were invited directly into a reception room to await the arrival of Rufeng Sect's leader, Nangong Liu, who would come to personally greet them as esteemed guests just as soon as he'd wrapped up his business.

The air was thick with the fragrance of ambergris incense, the carpet on the floor so plush their feet sank in deep, and the reception room was abloom with tender, stunning camellias. One plant with eight blossoms, each of a different color, was called "eight immortals crossing the sea." Another, bearing white petals with flecks of red, was called "blushing maiden clad in white." Yet another, with fine red veins spreading across the petals and leaves, was called "delicate beauty reclining." Xue Zhengyong knew nothing of such things, but Madam Wang was aware that every single plant here was a cultivar of the highest quality.[11]

Xue Meng was as clueless as his dad. He spotted a charming camellia with a pair of black dots on its soft petals, and intrigued, he reached out to touch it.

"Don't," Chu Wanning said.

"Why?"

Chu Wanning only shook his head. Madam Wang sighed and answered, "Precious treasures are a delight to the eyes. A flower like this sells for tens of thousands of gold."

Aghast, Xue Meng pulled his hand back, then dejectedly sat down in the plump-cushioned taishi chair. He thought about the rankings book he'd found at the book stall, and how furious he'd been when the list of the hundred richest heroes had excluded him. Now he realized the book hadn't lied. It was like his forehead was stamped with one giant, gloomy word: POOR.

That reminded him—where had that book gotten to? He hadn't had the chance to finish flipping through it before it was lost…

Before long, a curtain of red coral and freshwater pearls clacked as two elegant and dignified lady cultivators from Rufeng Sect stepped in, their snow-silk celestial robes aflutter. One stood to the left and one to the right as they raised the beaded curtain. They lowered their eyes and curtsied, announcing in voices songbird-sweet: "The esteemed sect leader has arrived."

A man in his forties strode in with a broad smile. He had a plain, somewhat bookish face, the kind easily forgotten in a crowd. Beyond the fact that his skin was exceptionally fair, his appearance was unremarkable.

The instant he opened his mouth, however, Mo Ran almost spat out the tea he'd been drinking.

"Aiya, Sect Leader Xue, Sect Leader Xue! This humble one has been gazing at the stars, gazing at the moon, waiting for the moment your esteemed selves would finally call on Rufeng Sect. Look at you, dashing and spirited, mighty and magnificent, a hero of the world, matched by no man! Excellent, fantastic, your mere presence illuminates my humble abode. Good! Good! Good!"

Xue Meng and Mo Ran looked on, speechless.

Although he was the leader of the foremost sect in the world, and although he was addressing the leader of the one ranked bottommost amongst the ten great sects, here was Nangong Liu, obsequious and effusive, crying out "Good!" thrice in a row, each more fervent than the last.

His liberal praise naturally pleased Xue Zhengyong a great deal. "No, no, Sect Leader Nangong is too gracious," he beamed back.

"This humble one is not merely being polite. From the bottom of my heart, I am truly envious of Sect Leader Xue. The sect leader is a hero of our time, awe-inspiring, worthy of admiration. Look at this humble one, I've become so lazy and flabby in my old age. I surely cannot compare."

Nangong Liu was so ecstatically warm that the peacock Xue Zhengyong's tail feathers began to spread, despite his best efforts. "Oh no, oh no, ha ha, ha ha ha, Sect Leader Nangong, you're too generous!"

Mo Ran had never crossed paths with Nangong Liu in his past life. When Mo Ran had come to eradicate Rufeng Sect, the sect leader had fled. Mo Ran cared nothing for such small fish and hadn't bothered to check if the man had died in the crossfire or managed to escape with his life and scrape out some further existence under a new name. Thus, this was the first time he'd ever been in the same room as Nangong Liu, and he found him

distasteful just from his tone. He muttered under his breath, “Who knew the sect leader of the number one sect in the world had such a silver tongue.”

Xue Meng heard him and, in agreement with his cousin for once, whispered back, “You’re right, that’s what you call a real silver tongue. *Tsk*, his words are so flowery I can barely smell those expensive blooms over the cloying sweetness.”

Satisfied with his praise of the elder, Nangong Liu moved on to the offspring. “Aiyo, is this not the darling of the heavens, little Xue-gongzi?”

Xue Meng might have been the Dirt-Poor Young Master, but he was not lacking in spirit. He cupped his hands without much enthusiasm. “Sect Leader Nangong.”

“Truly a gallant youth, handsome! Incredible! Look at this nose, those eyes, my my, the spirit! Truly, like father, like son!”

Xue Meng was struck speechless.

Nangong Liu turned back to Xue Zhengyong. “Xue-xiong, this humble one is ever so envious of you. What house in the world has a scion with half the mettle of your boy! I must say, there are so many outstanding young people in this vast cultivation world, but vanishing few who can match this son of yours!”

Xue Meng had held out at first, determined to detest him. But Nangong Liu was completely oblivious to his cool attitude, catapulting so much enthusiastic, effusive praise at him that it knocked poor Young Master Xue right off his feet and sent him reeling, until he eventually cracked a small smile. When he once more turned to whisper at Mo Ran, he said: “Ahem. This Sect Leader Nangong might be exaggerating a bit, but he speaks the truth.”

“What truth?” Mo Ran looked sidelong at him in amusement. “That there’s few who can match you?”

“What? I’m telling you, at the Spiritual Mountain Competition, I was—”

“That was just one competition; many of the rogue cultivators didn’t participate. Did you really think the world’s greatest would be found in that tiny scuffle of a competition?”

Xue Meng flushed and was silent for a long moment before

eventually grumbling indignantly, “Forget it, I know you’re just jealous.”

Were he younger, Mo Ran would have kept teasing him. Yet now that the words were on his tongue, he felt there was no point in arguing with Xue Meng and that competitive, narcissistic personality of his. So he nodded with a grin. “Fine, fine, fine, I was jealous. You’re the best.”

However, when Mo Ran glanced back at Nangong Liu, the smile in his eyes faded completely.

Many different types of villains walked this earth. Some were heinously depraved, their sins so grievous that all the world would clamor for their execution. Then there were those who were remarkable in another way. With their silver tongues and peerless talent for bootlicking, they could be rotten to the core and still not garner public scorn.

In Mo Ran’s previous life, he was the former. Yet the ones he despised most were not those righteous few who’d fought against him; he didn’t hate Mei Hanxue, he didn’t hate Xue Meng, he didn’t hate Ye Wangxi, and in the case of the last, he even admired and pitied him.

The ones he despised most were those like Nangong Liu. An ass-kisser who would kneel on the ground and lick another’s hemorrhoid so long as there was something in it for him. Fuck. A hemorrhoid-sucker, even.

Chu Wanning had been standing by the window since Nangong Liu’s entrance, looking out at the organized rows of houses and splendid sights of Rufeng Sect. The winds were brisk at this altitude, and the soft, scented curtains that hung in the window drifted gently, obscuring Chu Wanning’s figure in their gauzy haze. The fervent friendliness on Nangong Liu’s face froze momentarily. But he quickly recovered and headed toward the window. “Chu-zongshi…”

Chu Wanning did not turn. His expression was indifferent as he said, “Sect Leader Nangong, surely we know each other well enough that there’s no need for introductions.”

Caught on the easterly breeze, the silk curtains, as soft as spring waters, brushed persistently against Chu Wanning’s face.

Irritated, he raised a hand to block the offending curtain, then said mildly, “You can dispense with the pleasantries.”

Nangong Liu smiled. “This humble one only wanted to greet Chu-zongshi since it has been so long since we last met. Zongshi, must we be so distant?”

“I came for Nangong Si’s sake.” Chu Wanning still didn’t turn his head. “Not for yours.”

“Si-er will be delighted to see you. Even if you didn’t take him as your disciple, you were his first teacher, after all. After you left, he often told me how he missed you.”

Chu Wanning made no reply.

Encouraged by the lack of pushback, Nangong Liu continued, “Zongshi, your impassioned and righteous actions at Butterfly Town during the events of the Heavenly Rift were inspirational. Though Master Huaizui aided your return to the living world, I imagine you have yet to fully recover? Rufeng Sect has specially prepared twenty soul-nourishing pills of the highest quality for you to thank you on behalf of the entire cultivation realm, so please do accept—”

“Nangong Liu.”

Chu Wanning finally looked at him, but the way he addressed him had changed as well. He released the silk curtain and turned, his straight-backed, slender silhouette bleeding into the light streaming in from the window. His eyes were ablaze, his brows frigid, and his gaze terribly threatening. “Do not place me on a pedestal. How can Rufeng Sect speak on behalf of all the cultivators in the world? Quite some nerve you have.”

The corners of Nangong Liu’s mouth twitched, though he managed to keep his smile in place. At length, he said, still smiling, “There’s no need to be like this…”

Xue Zhengyong knew there was bad blood between Chu Wanning and Nangong Liu; in fact, this was something known to the whole of the cultivation world.

When Chu Wanning was fifteen, Nangong Liu had invited him into the sect as a guest master, provided the utmost hospitality, and treated him like a god. Nevertheless, after only a few years, Chu Wanning had suddenly had a very public falling-out with

Nangong Liu right in the middle of Rufeng Sect's grand hall.

The two had exchanged words, saying things like "Jincheng Lake," "holy weapons," "the lake monster's demand," "morality and justice," "ill for a long time," "the madam," et cetera.

All who witnessed the argument were left at a loss. What they *did* know was that at the end of it, an enraged Chu Wanning had slammed his hands on the table as he got up to leave.

"He had a stipend of tens of thousands of gold and received thousands of spiritual stones and talismans every month, but he refused to take so much as a single copper piece. He stood in the hall right in front of everybody and took off the qiankun pouch tied at his waist, returning all those riches. Then, glowering and speaking not a single word, he removed that fine jade headpiece Nangong Liu had given him to welcome him as guest master, letting his hair fall, and returned the headpiece to the reception official."

This was a tale many of the storytellers of the lower cultivation realm told with relish.

"Nangong Liu was greatly upset, yet even then he tried to smooth things over. He said to Chu-zongshi, 'You've served the sect for so long, even if you must leave, at least let us compensate you properly. Rufeng Sect has no wish to be known as a sect that doesn't pay its dues."

"But Chu-zongshi replied, 'I have served the sect all these years solely to repay the madam's kindness of a meal. With her death, the esteemed sect and I have come to a crossroads. We have chosen different paths, and I have no intention of staying any longer. Keep your money—it would shame me to take it.' Then he closed his eyes and turned to take his leave of Rufeng Sect."

Xue Zhengyong had thought the storytellers were exaggerating, so he'd once asked Chu Wanning what exactly Rufeng Sect had done to offend him. However, Chu Wanning did not like speaking about others behind their backs, so he'd only shaken his head and refused to give any details. But if the scene unfolding before them was any indication, it would appear the storytellers had uttered not a word of lie.

Seeing how tense the situation had become, Madam Wang stepped forward to make peace. She said gently, "Yuheng Elder,

please calm yourself, it's not good for your health." She then turned and bowed respectfully to Nangong Liu. "Nangong-xianjun, we appreciate your kind gesture, but Sisheng Peak does not lack for spiritual stones and valuable medicine. We cannot accept your soul-nourishing pills…"

Nangong Liu seized the chance to disengage and, after a beat, chuckled and said, "Madam is right, I was thoughtless. Yuheng Elder, forgive me, please don't take it to heart…"

Mo Ran watched all this and thought, *Shizun totally flung cold water in this guy's face and he still he smiles so easily. Amazing.* He took a sip of his Rizhao green tea.

Yet who would've thought? In the brief moment he looked down to sip his tea, Nangong Liu had come before him, bearing a wide grin.

Chapter 154:
Shizun, I'm Off to Look for Ye Wangxi

WELL NOW, this was awkward.

Everyone else, from Madam Wang to Xue Meng and even Xue Zhengyong, had politely stood in greeting when Nangong Liu came in. Chu Wanning hadn't cared to do so, but had remained standing where he was by the window.

But to Mo Ran, Rufeng Sect was no more than some worthless garbage sect he had trodden underfoot in his previous life. He knew the place was a disordered mess beneath the surface glamor, hardly worthy of respect. Still, he hadn't meant to make things awkward for Nangong Liu—it just never occurred to him to stand.

It was quite the strange scene. Nangong Liu, the host and elder, stood with an amicable smile, face not at all angry but full of warm familiarity. Mo Ran, the guest and junior, reclined languidly in the taishi chair with his legs crossed and a piping hot cup of tea in hand.

Xue Zhengyong hadn't paid any attention to what Mo Ran was doing, but as he turned to look now, he couldn't help his mortification. This boy really had no manners!

"And you must be…the famed Mo-zongshi that everyone talks of these last few years?"

Setting the lid back on his teacup, Mo Ran lifted his eyes and replied, "That's me."

"Such gallant y—"

"Nangong-xianjun." Mo Ran cut him off with a smile. "You've already used 'gallant youth' on my cousin, so perhaps not on me as well?"

He spoke courteously, with an easy tone and a warm smile, but the words were anything but. Nor did he bother to stand. In fact, after casually saying those words, he lifted his teacup once again, scraping the celadon lid against its rim, and blew at the gently rising steam. Lowering his gaze along with those long, dense

eyelashes, he returned to leisurely sipping his tea. He was young, handsome, tall, and poised. His attitude and mannerisms gave the impression that *he* was the true master of Rufeng Sect, the one who stood at the apex of the entire cultivation realm, while Nangong Liu was no more than a dog perched by his seat.

"Ha ha, Mo-zongshi is quite right. This humble one simply couldn't think of a better phrase due to my own ineloquence, so—"

"That can't be right." Mo Ran put down his teacup and looked up with a faint smile. "Nangong-xianjun has had no end of praise to dole out since entering this room. If *you* aren't a smooth talker, who out there is?"

"Aiya, Mo-zongshi flatters me too much."

"Who said I was flattering you?" Mo Ran smiled, bright eyes fixed on him. "Being a smooth talker isn't always a good thing."

Xue Zhengyong finally couldn't take it anymore. Lowering his voice, he scolded, "Ran-er—!"

It was understandable for Chu Wanning to be hostile toward Nangong Liu; at least there was history between them, and Chu Wanning had the social status to rival him. Mo Ran, on the other hand…

Mo Ran paid Xue Zhengyong no mind, speaking instead to Nangong Liu. "Nangong-xianjun should save the honeyed words for the other juniors. I'm a crude person; I won't understand it, and I don't want to hear it."

Xue Zhengyong was completely speechless.

Although Mo Ran knew his uncle would be displeased with his behavior, he didn't regret it in the least. The world was filled with so many vile things. Chu Wanning, with his fierce temper, was always sticking his neck out—take for example the exorcism of Luo Xianxian when he had beaten up Landlord Chen, the paying client, for mistreating a helpless girl, heedless of any damage to his reputation. He'd done nothing wrong, yet his name was ever maligned in the mouths of others. Those people would call him "coldblooded," "intractable," and "unfeeling."

Mo Ran was determined to stop others from calling his shizun "ill-mannered" ever again. Thus he vowed to act even more

egregiously than Chu Wanning did, even more over-the-top. It was a dumb plan, but it was the only one he could conceive of to protect his shizun. While the other three in the room accepted Nangong Liu's flattery and favor out of politeness and decorum, Mo Ran did not. Nor was this determination a spur-of-the-moment decision. Since the day he learned that it had been Chu Wanning who carried him from that bloody battlefield on his back, crawling when he could no longer walk; ever since he'd laid eyes on that human soul and that bowl of wontons in Mengpo Hall; ever since he'd traveled to the depths of the underworld to bring Chu Wanning back, Mo Ran had vowed to stand with Chu Wanning for as long as Chu Wanning would have him.

Nangong Liu had run into two walls in a row. Any other sect leader would have flipped his lid and kicked them all back onto the street. But Nangong Liu did no such thing. He acted as if it never happened, cheerfully chatting with Xue Zhengyong until Xue Zhengyong couldn't take the embarrassment and pulled him aside to quietly apologize for not getting his nephew in line.

Nangong Liu laughed it off. "Aiya, it's expected for a youngster to be bold. I think it's a wonderful thing that Mo-zongshi is so forthright."

After the meeting with Nangong Liu, Rufeng disciples led the party to the courtyard where they would stay for the duration of the wedding. Mo Ran sneezed the whole way there. Xue Meng turned to look at him. "Maybe Sect Leader Nangong laid a curse on you for all that mouthing off just now…"

"Shut it, more like *you* got cursed." Mo Ran's eyes were watery. "I…*achoo*, I can't handle such strong incense, that room back there—*achoo!* The incense was really too…*achoo!* Too…"

"Too unpleasant."

"Ah, Shi—*achoo*—zun."

Chu Wanning furrowed his brow and disdainfully passed him a handkerchief. "How unsightly. Wipe your face."

A teary-eyed Mo Ran accepted the haitang-embroidered handkerchief with a grin. "Shizun is so kind to me; thank you, Shizun."

Chu Wanning was a little flustered. "Who's kind to you?!"

“That’s right!” Xue Meng piped up, unwilling to be second. “Who’s kind to you, *I’m* clearly the one Shizun is kindest to!”

Mo Ran taunted him: “Aren’t you a little too old to be making a contest of that?” He turned quite serious and held up the handkerchief. “See this? Shizun said he’ll make me one just like it. Do *you* have one?”

Mortified, Chu Wanning snatched the handkerchief back with lightning speed as he snapped, “Mo Weiyu!”

Xue Meng momentarily froze in shock, then flew into a rage. “Yeah right! As if anyone’s gonna believe Shizun would make *you* a handkerchief! Keep dreaming! Shameless!”

Thus, chatting and bickering, they arrived at the lodgings Nangong Liu had arranged for them. There were four rooms around the courtyard, one for Xue Zhengyong and Madam Wang, and one each for the rest. Flowers danced gently between winding paths to quiet retreats, and the soothing sound of running water babbled in the background. It was a scene of singular elegance.

Mo Ran, who had been in good spirits, faltered when he saw which courtyard they would be staying in. His eyes glazed over for a moment despite himself. As he followed the rest into the courtyard, his mood grew grimmer as he took in the details of their surroundings.

This was the one place in Rufeng Sect that had left a deep impression on him in his previous life. Being back here made him think about other possibilities; if Chu Wanning had not recalled him from that path at the cost of his own life, perhaps he would’ve walked the same road in this lifetime and become Emperor Taxian-jun. Even now he would be commanding millions of Zhenlong chess pieces and burning this renowned sect to the ground. The thought sent streams of cold sweat down his back and a thousand thoughts rushing through his mind. Mo Ran closed his eyes. He was no longer the youth who wore his heart on his sleeve. He could keep his emotions in check, and so it was that no one noticed the haze clouding his heart.

Each retired to their own room to rest. Mo Ran stood in front of his for a while, hands clasped behind his back, but did not go inside. One of the maids in the courtyard, a little uneasy, asked carefully, “Does Xianjun not find the room satisfactory?”

“Oh, no, no.” Coming back to himself, Mo Ran smiled. “This courtyard just reminded me of somewhere I used to live, is all.”

“What a coincidence. I was worried Xianjun didn’t find the accommodations to his tastes. If Xianjun has any request, please let me know and I will do my best to fulfill it.”

“I’m good, thank you,” Mo Ran replied with a smile. He looked up at the hundred-year-old osmanthus tree in the yard, its trunk so thick he could barely wrap his arms around it. The dancing shade of its foliage swept across his vision like ghosts from his past. His eyelashes quivered minutely, and melancholy flooded his chest.

He spun around and called out to the maid who was leaving. “Wait!”

“Yes, Xianjun?”

Mo Ran hesitated. “I wanted to ask about someone.” He paused, and when he lifted his eyes, his gaze was torch-bright. “Do you know of a…”

“A…?”

“Actually, never mind, let me ask about someone else instead,” Mo Ran said. “Do you know where I can find Ye Wangxi?”

“Ye-gongzi is Elder Xu’s direct disciple,” the maid answered. “He lives with him in the same courtyard. Xianjun can find Ye-gongzi there.”

Mo Ran secretly let out the breath he’d been holding. The last time he’d seen Ye Wangxi had been at that restaurant, where Ye Wangxi had begged Nangong Si to go back with him and Nangong Si had refused. Back then, Ye Wangxi had said, “If it’s my presence back home that’s upsetting you, then I’ll leave, and you’ll never have to see me again.”

To be honest, Mo Ran had been worried about Ye Wangxi. He felt that the man had suffered enough in the previous lifetime. To Mo Ran’s mind, Ye Wangxi was not unlike Chu Wanning—both were people of morals and conviction, though one was reserved while the other was fiery. Yet neither met a good end. He regretted the past and had hoped Ye Wangxi would be better-off in this lifetime. He was relieved to hear that Nangong Si hadn’t been so heartless as to chase Ye Wangxi off in truth.

Elder Xu's courtyard was called Farewell to Three Lifetimes, the name supposedly taken from the phrase, "One sip of Mengpo's soup bids farewell to three lifetimes of memories." It meant that life was fleeting, and that it was best to forget that which ought to be forgotten instead of wallowing. All would be forgotten in death by the time one got to Naihe Bridge anyway.

How pessimistic. No wonder Ye Wangxi had turned out so repressed you couldn't beat a fart out of him.

"What a clever parrot, how interesting. Now recite this: one bowl of rice, one scoop of water, in a humble alley…"[12]

A guard had gone ahead to announce Mo Ran's visit and his intentions. Mo Ran had scarcely stepped around the partition wall when he heard the languid, teasing voice of a man from within. He took a few more steps and saw the speaker standing in the sun-drenched courtyard. He looked to be in his early thirties and was dressed in a robe so humble it sported a few patches at the corners of its sleeves. Despite the chill, he wore no shoes but stood barefoot on the cold stone pavement with a handful of sunflower seeds, teasing a snow-white parrot with blue eyes and a long tail.

The parrot flapped its wings as it rocked side to side on its perch. It seemed pleased with itself as it sang loudly back, "Ah—one bowl of rice, one scoop of water, in a humble alley—"

"Mm, not bad, not bad. You're smarter than Little Ye-zi,[13] you know. He wasn't nearly this clever when he was young, couldn't memorize this bit no matter how he tried." The man fed the parrot some seeds. "Here, treats from Daddy."

Mo Ran stared, speechless. Calling himself a bird's daddy… Did that make him a birdbrain then?

When the man turned and saw Mo Ran beside the partition wall, he cracked a sunflower seed between his teeth and spit the shell. Then he suddenly beamed. It was a bright smile, yet hints of something disquieting lurked beneath. Under the radiant sunlight, he projected an air of breezy nonchalance.

"Mo-zongshi, Mo Ran, yes?" He smiled. "Pleased to meet you."

Mo Ran returned the smile. "Same here."

With pleasantries duly exchanged, Mo Ran took a closer look

at this man's face. He looked vaguely familiar—as if Mo Ran had seen him before, during his slaughter of Rufeng Sect in the past life. Was he…

"Yifu, you're running around without shoes again."

A familiar voice rang out. A remark of such little import, but one that was thunderous to Mo Ran's ears. Mo Ran whipped his head around to find Ye Wangxi striding in through the moon gate, tall and slender as ever with a gentle expression softening his features. He walked straight over, holding a pair of yellow satin shoes which he set down at the man's feet.

Yifu? Ye Wangxi's foster father…

Through the thrumming of blood in his ears, Mo Ran could hear the cries and screams from a lifetime past, the clang of sword against sword, the thunder of battle drums.

"Yifu—!"

A face marred with bloodstains burst through his memories. Ye Wangxi, crying and screaming, voice splitting the heavens…

When Mo Ran had razed Rufeng Sect, Nangong Liu had fled to save his own hide, leaving the seventy-two cities headless and floundering. Elder Xu, Rufeng Sect's foremost warden, had stepped up to take the reins, marshaling the panicked masses—masses that Mo Ran would've otherwise wiped out in an instant—in resistance with the aid of Ye Wangxi. The man wasn't even a Nangong, yet he'd shouldered the responsibility that should've fallen on a sect leader of that surname and used his position as elder of Rufeng Sect to defend its seventy-two cities to the last.

He wasn't even Ye Wangxi's father by blood, yet he'd moved to intercept the sharp blade filled with spiritual power aimed at Ye Wangxi's back, sacrificing his own body to protect the child he raised. Mo Ran had watched this scene from atop the city walls, and his lips had twisted in a sneer—heavens only knew how jealous he'd been in that moment. To think: there was someone out there who would willingly die for another without a blood tie! His narrow-minded self had felt shock and pain. He was so jealous he'd almost gone mad, so jealous his eyes had gone bloodshot.

He'd thought, *Great, that's just great, look how lucky Ye Wangxi is*. Had there been a single person in this vast world other than his mother who'd been willing to die for him, would he have ended up like this?! The heavens were kind to everyone else; it was only to him that they were so grudging, so cruel!

He'd wanted to destroy everyone he was jealous of. All these people huddled together for warmth: he was going to send every last one of them to hell. How was it fair that he was the only person to never experience a single day of contentment or a single spark of warmth, that the only person who had ever been kind to him had died long ago. It was the only bit of warmth he'd ever had; why did it have to be taken from him?!

He *hated*.

Looking back, Mo Ran could only think of how stupid he'd been back then. There *was* someone in this world who would willingly die for him. *He* was the one who had missed it. Who hadn't realized, and who had let that person down.

Mo Ran closed his eyes and took a moment to settle his turbulent emotions before looking up again. He knew who this man was now: this was Ye Wangxi's shizun, as well as his yifu, Xu Shuanglin. The man who, on the second day of the slaughter of Rufeng Sect, had died in battle to save Ye Wangxi.

Mo Ran turned away, a bitter ache in his heart. He couldn't bear to look at that smiling, carefree person bathed in sunlight any longer. He went over to greet Ye Wangxi instead. "Ye-gongzi."

Ye Wangxi paused when he noticed Mo Ran standing a short distance away. Then he smiled and said, "Ah, Mo-xiong is here too. Long time no see."

"Long time no see."

In this lifetime, Ye Wangxi had only met Mo Ran a handful of times and wasn't terribly familiar with him. He continued to smile politely as he asked, "Are you here for my yifu?"

Mo Ran silently glanced over at Xu Shuanglin before shaking his head, a little awkward. "No. I'm here to see you."

"Well, look at that, Little Ye-zi. When was the last time someone came here looking for you?" Grinning lazily, Xu Shuanglin popped another sunflower seed in his mouth. "Where did you meet Mo-zongshi, anyway?"

"At Peach Blossom Springs."

"That's nice, that's nice," Xu Shuanglin said, smiling as he poured the rest of the sunflower seeds into the bird's food bowl. "You young ones keep chatting; I'm going to go take a walk around."

Ye Wangxi tugged at him. "Yifu, you aren't wearing your shoes again."

"Oh, I forgot." Still smiling, Xu Shuanglin slipped the shoes on. "There, better?"

But, out of the corner of his eye, Mo Ran saw the man stroll leisurely around the corner, bend down, take the shoes off again,

and tuck them into the front of his robe before continuing on his merry way.

This father-son pair, in terms of both appearance and personality, was…really very strange. Xu Shuanglin looked very young on account of his cultivation method, not a day past thirty. He seemed more like Ye Wangxi's brother than anything else. In fact, with his willful, mischievous temperament, he seemed more like a *younger* brother. What was with that plaque outside solemnly inscribed with "Farewell to Three Lifetimes" then—was he just messing around, or what?

Side by side, Ye Wangxi and Mo Ran walked unhurriedly along a shaded path. The courtyard was full of trees that flowered and bore fruit, but it was now the middle of winter, and everything was withered. Only a few dry, yellow leaves clung to the branches, quivering in the wake of the passing wind.

"Sorry about what happened at the restaurant last time. It was quite embarrassing."

"Not at all," Mo Ran said. "How have you been lately?"

He regretted the words as soon as they'd left his mouth. Ye Wangxi wasn't the type to say anything even if he was miserable. Sure enough, he smiled a small smile and said, "I'm all right, and you?"

"Pretty good."

The two weren't close. Mo Ran had only sought him out because he remembered the sins of his past life, felt remorseful, and wanted to see for himself how this still-living Ye Wangxi fared. But now that he was alone with him, he really didn't know what to talk about. Mo Ran knew many of Ye Wangxi's secrets, none of which were appropriate topics of discussion; he found himself with nothing to say.

The two strolled in silence for a time. Ye Wangxi asked, "How's Xia Sini doing?"

Mo Ran was caught by surprise for a moment, then chuckled. "You still remember that name? Impressive."

"His name *is* rather memorable."

"Ha ha, I suppose. Xia Sini is here too; you can see him later."

Ye Wangxi seemed bewildered. “He’s here too? But…I don’t think the sect leader would’ve invited…”

“You don’t know who Xia Sini really is yet, do you?” Mo Ran said with a laugh. “Let me tell you, then. It’s a long story.”

So it was that he recounted the chain of events that had led to Chu Wanning becoming Xia Sini. Ye Wangxi looked pensive for a while, then sighed. “Mo-gongzi is very fortunate to have him as your master.”

“And Rufeng Sect is very fortunate to count Ye-gongzi among its disciples.”

Ye Wangxi, a little embarrassed, replied with another small smile, “Mo-gongzi is too kind.”

They arrived at a small, red-painted pontoon bridge. The path here had been all dry branches and shriveled leaves, but this place was verdant, with tall stalks of bamboo that stood proud and unyielding in wind and snow. The waters of Rufeng Sect had been infused with spiritual power to prevent freezing, and the foot of the bridge was awash with the sweet tinkling of running water embraced by twin groves of lush green.

When Mo Ran turned, he saw Ye Wangxi with eyes downcast, his gaze fixed on the sparkling stream and its reflected light dancing across his dark pupils. He was the same person, but the new weariness on his face was hard to miss.

Nangong Si’s marriage was indeed too, too cruel to Ye Wangxi. Mo Ran suddenly found it hard to stomach. He felt as if he were looking at Chu Wanning, who gave so much of himself yet hardly received as much as a backward glance.

“Ye-gongzi, why don’t you come to Sisheng Peak instead?” Mo Ran asked.

“What?”

Mo Ran shut his mouth. The words had felt overly impetuous the instant they’d passed his lips, and he well knew what Ye Wangxi’s answer would be. He sighed and said, “It was just an offhand remark. Don’t mind me.”

Ye Wangxi smiled in response. He had used to have a handsome, alluring smile, seven parts gallantry and three parts

elegance. Here was still the same person with the same smile—but his cheeks were now sunken, and though the gallantry remained, the elegance had withered, leaving twin pools of sorrow. It was obvious that he had tried to hide it. But despite his best efforts, this sorrow was too deep to be concealed.

"Is Mo-xiong here to poach people for Sisheng Peak?" Ye Wangxi quipped.

"Ha ha, sure am. Though Ye-gongzi probably won't bite, so just take it as a joke."

"Mn, my yifu is here, so I'm not leaving."

"What do you plan to do, then?"

Pain flashed across Ye Wangxi's face, and for once he didn't have a ready answer. What *did* he plan to do? He didn't know either. Ye Wangxi felt he was a moth to Nangong Si's flame. He couldn't help being drawn to that warmth even if it led to his own ruin.

But Nangong Si didn't want him.

"I'll just…stay here at Rufeng Sect, keep doing the things that are my duty," Ye Wangxi said with a wan smile. "Serve the sect leader, serve Yifu, and later, serve the young master…" He paused, and his hands tightened into fists, the joints as pale as jade.

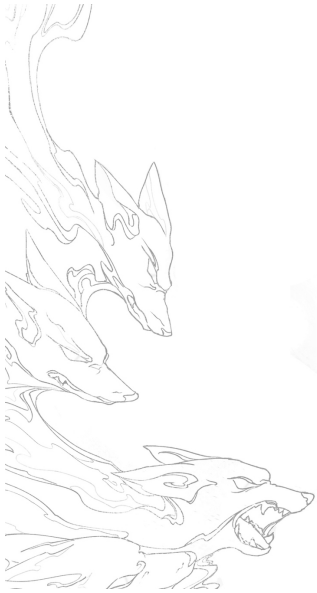
Mo Ran was perturbed. How could Ye Wangxi say the rest of that sentence so calmly, how could he say the next words at all…

"And serve the young mistress."

Ye Wangxi finally dropped his gaze, as if unable to bear it any longer. But only for an instant. Then he raised his eyes, looking at Mo Ran in that gentle, polite way of his. He even managed to keep a smile on his face as he stood in the bitter cold of winter, resilient as the bamboo all around.

A sudden gust sent the fresh-fallen snow scattering in the bamboo groves.

In that moment, Mo Ran decided: no, Nangong Si was *not* going to marry Song Qiutong.



THE STORY CONTINUES IN
The Husky & His White Cat Shizun
VOLUME 5

APPENDIX

Characters, Names, and Locations

Characters

The identity of certain characters may be a spoiler; use this guide with caution on your first read of the novel.

Note on the given name translations: Chinese characters may have many different readings. Each reading here is just one out of several possible interpretations.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Mo Ran

墨燃 Surname Mo, “ink”; given name Ran, “to ignite”

Courtesy name: Weiyu (微雨 / “gentle rain”)

Title(s):

Taxian-jun (踏仙君 / “treading on immortals”)

Weapon(s):

Bugui (不归 / “no return”)

Jiangui (见鬼 / literally, “seeing ghosts”; metaphorically, “What the hell?”)

Spiritual element: Wood

Orphaned at a young age, Mo Ran was found at fourteen by his uncle, Xue Zhengyong, and brought back to Sisheng Peak. Despite his late start, he has a natural talent for cultivation. In his previous lifetime, Chu Wanning’s refusal to save Shi Mei as he died sent Mo Ran into a spiral of grief, hatred, and destruction. Reinventing himself as Taxian-jun, tyrannical emperor of the cultivation world, he committed many atrocities—including taking his own shizun captive—before ultimately killing himself. To Mo Ran’s surprise, he woke to find himself back in his fifteen-year-old body with all the memories of his past self and the opportunity to relive his life with all new choices, which is where the story begins.

Since his rebirth, Mo Ran has realized many things are not as they had seemed in the previous lifetime, a realization that came to

a head after Chu Wanning's death while sealing the Heavenly Rift at Butterfly Town. During the five years of Chu Wanning's seclusion following his return from the underworld, Mo Ran wanders the land making a name for himself as Mo-zongshi.

Chu Wanning

楚晚宁 Surname Chu; given name Wanning "evening peace"

Title(s):

Yuheng of the Night Sky (晚夜玉衡 / Wanye, "late night"; Yuheng, "Alioth, the brightest star in Ursa Major")

Beidou Immortal (北斗仙尊 Beidou "the Big Dipper," title *xianzun*, "immortal")

Weapon(s):

Tianwen / 天问 "Heavenly Inquiry: to ask the heavens about life's enigmatic questions." The name reflects Tianwen's interrogation ability.

Jiuge / 九歌 "Nine Songs." Chu Wanning describes it as having a "chilling temperament."

Spiritual element: Wood and Metal

A powerful cultivator who specializes in barriers and is talented in mechanical engineering, as well as an elder of Sisheng Peak. Aloof, strict, and short-tempered, Chu Wanning has only three disciples to his name: Xue Meng, Shi Mei, and Mo Ran. In Mo Ran's previous lifetime, Chu Wanning stood up to Taxian-jun, obstructing his tyrannical ambitions, before he was taken captive and eventually died as a prisoner. In the present day, he is Mo Ran's shizun, as well as the target of Mo Ran's mixed feelings of fear, loathing, and lust. Unaware of Mo Ran's rebirth, Chu Wanning has been acting in accordance with his own upright principles and beliefs, which culminated in his death during the events of the Heavenly Rift at Butterfly Town. With the aid of Master Huaizui and Mo Ran, he returns to the world of the living, but only after five years in seclusion.

Chu Wanning's titles refer to the brightest stars in the Ursa Major constellation, reflecting his stellar skills and presence. Specifically, Yuheng is Alioth, the brightest star in Ursa Major, and

the Big Dipper is an asterism consisting of the seven brightest stars of the same constellation. Furthermore, Chu Wanning's weapons are named after poems in the *Verses of Chu*, a collection by Qu Yuan from the Warring States Period. The weapons' primary attacks, such as "Wind," take their names from *Shijing: Classic of Poetry*, the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry. The collection comprises 305 works that are categorized into popular songs and ballads (风 / feng, "wind"), courtly songs (雅 / ya, "elegant"), or eulogies (颂 / song, "ode").

SISHENG PEAK

Xue Meng

薛蒙 Surname Xue; given name Meng "blind/ignorant"

Courtesy name: Ziming (子明 / "bright/clever son")

The "darling of the heavens," Chu Wanning's first disciple, Xue Zhengyong and Madam Wang's son, and Mo Ran's cousin. Proud, haughty, and fiercely competitive, Xue Meng can at times be impulsive and rash. He often clashes with Mo Ran, especially when it comes to their shizun, whom he hugely admires. During the five years of Chu Wanning's seclusion, Xue Meng continues training on his own and wins first place in the inter-sect Spiritual Mountain Competition.

Shi Mei

师昧 Surname Shi; given name Mei, "to conceal"

Courtesy name: Mingjing (明净 / "bright and clean")

Early name(s): Xue Ya (薛丫 / Surname Xue, given name Ya, "little girl")

Xue Meng's close friend, Chu Wanning's second disciple, and Mo Ran's boyhood crush. Gentle, kind, and patient, with beautiful looks to match, Shi Mei often plays peacemaker when his fellow disciples argue, which is often. Where Mo Ran and Xue Meng are more adept in combat, he specializes in the healing arts. In the previous lifetime, he died during the events of the Heavenly Rift at Butterfly Town, but in this lifetime, it is Chu Wanning who dies in his stead. During the five years of Chu Wanning's seclusion, Shi Mei

hones his healing skills at Guyueye and tends to the sick and injured across the lower cultivation realm.

Xue Zhengyong

薛正雍 Surname Xue; given name Zhengyong, “righteous and harmonious”

Weapon: Fan that reads “Xue is Beautiful” on one side and “Others are Ugly” on the opposite.

The sect leader of Sisheng Peak, Xue Meng’s father, and Mo Ran’s uncle. Jovial, boisterous, and made out of 100 percent wifeguy material, Xue Zhengyong takes his duty to protect the common people of the lower cultivation realm very much to heart.

Madam Wang

王夫人

Xue Meng’s mother, lady of Sisheng Peak, and Mo Ran’s aunt. Timid and unassuming, she originally hails from Guyueye Sect and specializes in the healing arts.

A-Li

阿狸

Madam Wang’s cat. Not pregnant, just fat.

SISHENG PEAK ELDERS

The names of Sisheng Peak’s elders vary in origin. Most of their names come from the constellation Ursa Major, such as Chu Wanning’s “Yuheng.” Three elders take their names from the Sha Po Lang star triad used in a form of fortune-telling based on Chinese astrology.

Jielü Elder

戒律长老 Jielü, “discipline”

In charge of meting out discipline.

Xuanji Elder

璇玑长老 Xuanji, “Megrez, the delta Ursae Majoris star”

Kind and gentle; practices an easy cultivation method. Popular with the disciples.

Lucun Elder

禄存长老 Lucun, “Phecda, the gamma Ursae Majoris star”

Beautiful and foppish. Has a habit of phrasing things in a questionable manner.

Qisha Elder

七杀长老 Qisha, “Polis, the Power Star in Sha Po Lang”

Very done with Lucun Elder.

Pojun Elder

破军长老 Pojun, “Alkaid, the Ruinous Star in Sha Po Lang”

Forthright and spirited.

Tanlang Elder

贪狼长老 Tanlang, “Dubhe, the Flirting Star in Sha Po Lang”

Sardonic and ungentle with his words. Skilled in the healing arts, and on pretty bad terms with Chu Wanning.

JINCHENG LAKE

Fake “Gouchen the Exalted”

勾陈上宫 Gouchen, “Curved Array, part of the Ursa Minor constellation”; shanggong, “exalted”)

An enigmatic figure who pretended to be the real Gouchen the Exalted, the God of Weaponry. He is in truth a corpse controlled by a white chess piece in a mysterious Zhenlong Chess Formation.

Wangyue

望月 Wangyue, “full moon”; alternatively, “gazing at the moon”

A huge, turquoise-black dragon who lives in Jincheng Lake. In their previous lifetime, he gave Mo Ran his sword, Bugui, in exchange for a plum blossom from the waist of the mountain.

Heart-Pluck Willow

摘心柳 Zhaixin Liu, “Heart-Pluck Willow”

The spirit of the willow tree in Jincheng Lake, which shelters Gouchen the Exalted’s arsenal of holy weapons.

PEACH BLOSSOM SPRINGS

Eighteen

十八

A member of the feathered tribe, and the eighteenth in the tribe to cultivate a human form. In charge of introductions to Peach Blossom Springs, as well as the cultivators training in the attack division.

Elder Immortal

羽民上仙 Yumin, “feathered tribe”; shangxian, “elder immortal”

The master of Peach Blossom Springs, and the first in the feathered tribe to cultivate a human form. Though she looks to be a young woman, her true age is unknown.

ILLUSORY LIN’AN

Chu Lan

楚澜 Surname Chu; given name Lan, “to swell; billowing”

Chu Xun’s young son, around three or four years old, who bears a strong resemblance to Chu Wanning-as-Xia Sini. A sweet-natured, generous child.

Lin Wan'er

林婉儿 Surname Lin; given name Wan'er,"gentle, graceful"

Also referred to as Madam Chu. Chu Xun's wife, who passed away not long after Chu Lan's birth.

Xiaoman

小满 Xiaoman, "The eighth of twenty-four solar terms in traditional Chinese lunisolar calendars"

A young man of Lin'an, aged fourteen or fifteen, whose adoptive father was killed during the breach in the barrier.

Skeleton King

骷髅王

One of the nine kings of the ghost realm. Referred to as "the ghost king" during the Lin'an incident until his specific identity was revealed. He bears a grudge against Chu Xun for daring to defy him.

NANKE TOWN (UNDERWORLD)

Chu Xun

楚洵 Surname Chu; given name Xun, "truly"

An upright and powerful yet gentle cultivator who died over two hundred years ago in Lin'an City. Mo Ran and Chu Wanning met an illusory emulation of him during their Domain of Fiends trial back in Peach Blossom Springs. He bears a strong resemblance to Chu Wanning.

Rong Jiu

容九 Surname Rong; given name Jiu, "nine"

A prostitute in a brothel in the pleasure district near Sisheng Peak. In his previous lifetime, he was greatly favored by Mo Ran, but repaid him by attempting to steal Mo Ran's cultivation for Chang Da, and eventually died of an STI. In the current timeline, his plot was foiled by the newly reborn Mo Ran, who robbed him

blind.

Fourth Ghost King (四鬼王)

One of the nine kings of the ghost realm. Indulgent, hedonistic, and short-tempered, with a fondness for mortal pleasures: good food and great beauties, men and women alike.

Unnamed Gatekeeper

A soldier who died in battle from a stab wound, who now sits at the Ghost Gate as the immigration officer for the underworld.

Unnamed painter-scholar

A scholar who likely starved to death due to being unable to sell his landscape paintings.

RUFENG SECT

Ye Wangxi

叶忘昔 Surname Ye; given name Wangxi, “to forget the past”

A disciple of Rufeng Sect who was adopted by Rufeng Sect’s chief elder. Highly regarded by the sect leader of Rufeng Sect, and a competent, chivalric, and upright sort. Mo Ran noted that in their previous lifetime, Ye Wangxi was second only to Chu Wanning in the entire cultivation world.

Nangong Si

南宫弼 Surname Nangong; given name Si, “to ride, or horse”

The only son of Rufeng Sect’s leader, who in their previous lifetime died before Mo Ran’s ascension. Brash, headstrong, and volatile in temperament. He rides on his faewolf, has a hearty appetite for meat and wine, and an antagonistic relationship with Ye Wangxi.

Naobaijin

瑙白金 Nao, “carnelian”; bai “white”; jin “gold”

Nangong Si’s faewolf. Thrice the height of a human, with carnelian-red eyes, snow-white fur, and gold claws.

Song Qiutong (Present)

宋秋桐 Surname Song; given name Qiutong, “autumn, tung tree”

A Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast who bears a resemblance to Shi Mei. After being rescued by Ye Wangxi, she joins Rufeng Sect as a disciple. In the previous lifetime, Taxian-jun took her as his wife and empress after burning Rufeng Sect. She also shares a name with a character in *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

XUANYUAN PAVILION / RAINBELL ISLE

Second Pavilion Master

二阁主

A girl who looks no older than eleven or twelve, but who is in actuality over a hundred years old. As Second Pavilion Master of Xuanyuan Pavilion, she acts as auction master for the offered goods.

Hanlin the Sage

寒鳞圣手 Han, “cold”; lin, “scales”; shengshou,“highly skilled, sage doctor”

An elder of Guyueye Sect. Highly skilled in refining pills and medicines.

BITAN MANOR

Li Wuxin

李无心 Surname Li; given name Wuxin, “‘an empty state of consciousness’ in buddhist meditation”

Leader of the recently established Bitan Manor. A man in his fifties, with a pair of long, flowing whiskers. Smooth-talking and

somewhat condescending to those he views as beneath himself.

Zhen Congming

甄淙明 Surname Zhen; given name Congming “water gurgling, bright/clever”

The thirteenth direct disciple of Li Wuxin. Ignorant, and ignorant of his own ignorance. His name is a homonym for the phrase “very smart.”

OTHER CHARACTERS

Mei Hanxue

梅含雪 Surname Mei; given name Hanxue, “to hold, snow”

A striking cultivator with pale gold hair and jade green eyes, Mei Hanxue is the head disciple of Kunlun Taxue Palace who stayed with the Xue family at Sisheng Peak for a short time as a child. He is skilled in various arts, including dance and playing musical instruments, and is an appreciator of wine and song. Known as “Da-shixiong” to the lady cultivators who flock around him, as well as by less flattering epithets to others, namely Xue Meng and Ye Wangxi.

Chang Da

常大 Surname Chang; family status: eldest

The eldest son of a wealthy salt merchant family in Yizhou. In the previous lifetime, he bought Rong Jiu’s freedom and took Rong Jiu into his household in exchange for Mo Ran’s cultivation. In this lifetime, he worked together with the fake Gouchen and helped bring about the events of the Heavenly Rift that took Chu Wanning’s life.

Liu-gong (刘公)

An elderly servant of Taxian-jun in his previous lifetime.

Luo Xianxian

罗纤纤 Surname Luo; given name Xianxian, “delicate, slender”

A gentle, kind young girl of Butterfly Town, who was childhood sweethearts with and eventually married to Chen Bohuan, eldest son of the Chen family who lived next door. She was taken advantage of by the Chens after her father’s death, and eventually died and came back to haunt them as a malicious ghost.

Master Huaizui

怀罪 Huai, “to bear, to think of”; zui, “sins, guilt, blame”

A monk of Wubei Temple. Renowned in the cultivation world for his choice to remain in the mortal realm despite having achieved enlightenment and being able to ascend to immortality. Master Huaizui has been in seclusion in Wubei Temple for over a century, and is reportedly able to wield the “Rebirth” technique of the three forbidden techniques. Despite his age, his physical appearance is that of a man in his early thirties. He wielded Rebirth, one of the three forbidden techniques, to bring Chu Wanning back from the underworld.

Mo Ran’s Mother (Unnamed)

Mo Ran’s mother, who raised him on her own. A talented singer and dancer, she performed on the streets to earn money to keep Mo Ran and herself fed. Compassionate and kind despite the misery of her circumstances, she is described by Mo Ran as his first moral “lighthouse.”

Jiang Xi

姜曦 Surname Jiang; given name Xi, “dawn, sunshine”

Sect Leader of Guyueye Sect. Rumored to be the richest person in the cultivation world.

Ma Yun (马芸)

Sect leader of Taobao Estate. Rumored to be the third richest person in the cultivation world.

Ling-er

菱儿 Ling, “water chestnut”; dimunitive suffix -er

A farmgirl from Yuliang Village. Charming and bold, she harbors ambitions for a better life outside her small village.

Sects and Locations

THE TEN GREAT SECTS

The cultivation world is divided into the upper and lower cultivation realms. Most of the ten great sects are located within the upper cultivation realm, while Sisheng Peak is the only great sect within the lower cultivation realm.

Sisheng Peak

死生之巅 Sisheng zhi dian, “the peak of life and death”

A sect in the lower cultivation realm located in modern-day Sichuan. It sits near the boundary between the mortal realm and the ghost realm, and was founded relatively recently by Xue Zhengyong and his brother. The uniform of Sisheng Peak is light armor in dark blue with silver trim, and members of the sect practice cultivation methods that do not require abstinence from meat or other foods. The sect’s name refers to both its physical location in the mountains as well as the metaphorical extremes of life and death. Xue Zhengyong named many locations in Sisheng Peak after places and entities in the underworld because the sect is located in an area thick with ghostly yin energy, and he is furthermore not the sort to think up conventionally nice-sounding, formal names.

Aaaaah (啊啊啊) and Waaaah Cliffs (哇哇哇)

Where Frostsky Hall is located. Named by Xue Zhengyong as an expression of the grief he felt in the days following his brother’s death.

Frostsky Hall (霜天殿)

A hall in Sisheng Peak where bodies are kept until burial.

Heaven-Piercing Tower (通天塔)

The location where Mo Ran first met Chu Wanning as well as the location where, in his past life, he laid himself to rest.

Loyalty Hall (丹心殿)

The main hall of Sisheng Peak. Taxian-jun renamed it Wushan Palace (巫山殿) when he took over the sect.

Melodic Springs (妙音池)

The communal bath of Sisheng Peak.

Mengpo Hall (孟婆堂)

The dining hall at Sisheng Peak. Named after the mythological old woman who distributes memory-erasing soup to souls before they are reborn.

Platform of Sin and Virtue (善恶台)

A platform where public events in Sisheng Peak, including punishment and announcements, are carried out.

Red Lotus Pavilion (红莲水榭)

Chu Wanning's residence. An idyllic pavilion surrounded by rare red lotuses. Some have been known to call it "Red Lotus Hell" or the "Pavilion of Broken Legs." In the previous lifetime, Chu Wanning's body was kept at the Red Lotus Pavilion after his death, preserved by Taxian-jun's spiritual energy.

Silk-Rinse Hall (浣纱堂)

The tailoring hall of Sisheng Peak, which creates and tailors clothing for members of the sect.

Three Lives Platform (三生台)

A platform in Sisheng Peak. Named after the mythological stone in the underworld located by Naihe Bridge that records a soul's past, present, and future lives.

Linyi Rufeng Sect

临沂儒风门 Rufeng, "honoring Confucian ideals"

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located in Linyi, a prefecture in modern-day Shandong Province. Has seventy-two cities and is known for being affluent and well-respected. In Taxian-jun's lifetime, he burned them all to the ground.

Dai City (岱城)

A mildly prosperous city by the foot of Dawning Peak. Caters to traveling cultivators on their way to Jincheng Lake.

Kunlun Taxue Palace

昆仑踏雪宫 Taxue, "stepping softly across snow"

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located on the Kunlun Mountain range. Its name refers to both the physical location of the sect in the snowy Kunlun Mountain range and the ethereal grace of the cultivators within the sect.

Guyueye

孤月夜 Guyueye, "a lonely moon in the night sky"

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located on Rainbell Isle. They focus on the medicinal arts. The name is a reference to the solitary and isolated nature of Guyueye—the island is a lone figure in the water, much like the reflection of the moon, cold and aloof.

Rainbell Isle (霖铃屿)

Not an actual island, but the back of an enormous ancient tortoise, which was bound to the founder of the sect by a blood pact to carry the entirety of Guyueye sect on its shell.

Xuanyuan Pavilion

A subsidiary operation of Guyueye, and a trading post well known in the cultivation world. Xuanyuan is a name for the Yellow Emperor, a legendary Chinese historical figure and deity, who was one of the Three Sovereigns and Five Deities alongside Fuxi.

Fragrance Inn

An inn on Rainbell Isle.

Wubei Temple

无悲寺 wubei, “without sadness/grief”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm. Disciples of Wubei Temple are monks.

Dragonblood Mountain (龙血山)

A mountain near Wubei Temple.

Bitan Manor

碧潭庄 bitan, “green pool”

A recently established and up-and-coming sect in the upper cultivation realm. Barriers are *not* their specialty.

Taobao Estate

桃宝山庄 Taobao, “Peach Treasure”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located in West Lake.

Jiangdong Hall

江东堂 Jiangdong, the south bank of the Yangtze River

A sect in the upper cultivation realm. Their new sect leader is rumored to be a woman with a short temper.

ILLUSORY LIN’AN

Lin’an City (临安城)

The setting of an illusory realm where Mo Ran and Xia Sini undergo their trial.

Putuo (普陀)

The destination of the refugees from Lin’an during the first ghost realm barrier breach. Putuo in modern China is a location

sacred to Guanyin.

Qiantang River (钱塘江)

The river by which Lin'an City is located.

City God Temple (城隍庙)

A temple dedicated to the god of the walls and moats that protect cities. Nearly every city has its own City God Temple.

UNDERWORLD

Underworld (阴间/鬼界/地府)

The realm of the dead, where spirits go to await reincarnation, or are sent to one of the eighteen hells to be punished, depending on their accumulated karma.

Ghost Gate (鬼门关)

The holding place and entrance of the underworld. Essentially the immigration checkpoint for the newly dead.

Eighteen Hells (十八层)

Eighteen levels within the underworld where souls suffer to dispel bad karma from committing heinous deeds. Each level specializes in different types of punishments for different types of crimes.

Infinite Hells (无间地狱)

The deepest and most terrible level of hell, where those who have committed grave crimes in life suffer without respite.

Nanke Town (南柯乡)

The first level of the underworld, where the deceased stay as they await their summons by the judge of the underworld to stand trial and receive judgment.

Tailwind Hall (顺风楼)

A place in Nanke Town where one can go to seek information, whether to find people or investigate matters in the living world.

Ailing Souls Sanitarium (病魂馆)

The underworld's infirmary.

OTHER

Tianyin Pavilion

天音阁 tianyin, "heavenly/divine sound"

An independent organization set up by the ten great sects that oversees trials and the imprisonment of criminals. They manage a prison that is reserved for criminals who have committed heinous crimes.

Spiritual Mountain (灵山)

Where inter-sect meetings and competitions are held.

Yangzhou Port (扬州口岸)

Yangzhou is a city in Jiangsu province, historically one of the wealthiest cities in China.

Wuchang Town

无常镇 Wuchang, "the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence"

A town not far from Sisheng Peak.

Zhongqiu Restaurant (仲秋楼)

A newly opened restaurant in Wuchang Town.

House of Drunken Jade (醉玉楼)

A high-class pleasure house in Xiangtan, famed for its theater, star songstress, and food. It burned down not long before the events

of the current timeline.

Butterfly Town (彩蝶镇)

A town located near Baitou Mountain, noted for its relative prosperity compared to its neighbors. Its specialty exports are flowers, fragrance, and perfume powder. It also cleaves to the tradition of ghost marriages.

Yuliang Village

玉凉村 Yuliang, “cool jade”

A tiny farming village not far from Butterfly Town.

Dawning Peak (旭映峰)

A sacred mountain located in the upper cultivation realm, within the territory of Linyi Rufeng Sect. Known as the place where Gouchen the Exalted forged the Heavenly Emperor’s sword, it is now a pilgrimage site for cultivators seeking holy weapons.

Jincheng Lake (金成池)

A lake at the summit of Dawning Peak that remains frozen over year-round. According to legend, it was formed by a drop of Gouchen the Exalted’s blood, shed as he forged the Heavenly Emperor’s holy sword.

Yunmeng Marsh

云梦泽 Yunmeng, “Cloud dream”

A marsh that was plagued by a carp spirit for many years.

Peach Blossom Springs (桃花源)

Home of the feathered tribe, located beyond the maze of Mount Jiuhua and within the land of the immortals. *The Peach Blossom Spring* is a fable written by Chinese poet Tao Yuanming, in which the eponymous setting is an ethereal utopia where people live a peaceful, prosperous existence in harmony with nature, unaware of the outside world. In popular culture, the setting has

become a symbol of an ideal world, and it has been depicted in many paintings, poems, music, and so forth.

Name Guide

Courtesy Names

Courtesy names were a tradition reserved for the upper class and were typically granted at the age of twenty. While it was generally a male-exclusive tradition, there is historical precedent for women adopting courtesy names after marriage. It was furthermore considered disrespectful for peers of the same generation to address one another by their birth name, especially in formal or written communication. Instead, one's birth name was used by elders, close friends, and spouses.

This tradition is no longer practiced in modern China, but is commonly seen in wuxia and xianxia media. As such, many characters in these novels have more than one name in these stories, though the tradition is often treated malleably for the sake of storytelling. For example, in *Husky*, characters receive their courtesy names at the age of fifteen rather than twenty.

Diminutives, nicknames, and name tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

Da-: A prefix meaning "eldest."

Doubling: Doubling a syllable of a person's name can be a nickname, i.e. "Mengmeng"; it has childish or cutesy connotations.

-er: A word for "son" or "child." Added to a name, it expresses affection. Similar to calling someone "Little" or "Sonny." Always a suffix.

Xiao-: A diminutive meaning "little." Always a prefix.

Family

All of these terms can be used alone or with the person's name.

Di/Didi: Younger brother or a younger male friend.

Ge/Gege: Older brother or an older male friend.

Jie/Jiejie/Zizi: Older sister or an older female friend; “zizi” is a regional variant of “jieije.”

Mei/Meimei: Younger sister or a younger female friend.

Cultivation

-jun: A term of respect, often used as a suffix after a title.

Daozhang/Xianjun: Polite terms of address for cultivators, equivalent to “Mr. Cultivator.” Can be used alone as a title or attached to someone’s family name. Xianjun has an implication of immortality.

Qianbei: A respectful title or suffix for someone older, more experienced, and/or more skilled in a particular discipline. Not to be used for blood relatives.

Xianzhu: “Immortal lord/leader.” Used in *Husky* as a respectful title for Eighteen, the leader of Peach Blossom Springs.

Zongshi: A title or suffix for a person of particularly outstanding skill; largely only applied to cultivators in the story of *Husky*.

Cultivation Sects

Shizun: Teacher/master. For one’s master in one’s own sect. Gender neutral. Literal meaning is “honored/venerable master” and is a more respectful address, though Shifu is not disrespectful.

Shizu: Grand-teacher/master. For the master of one’s master.

Shixiong/Shige: Older martial brother. For senior male members of one’s own sect. Shige is a more familiar variant.

Shijie: Older martial sister. For senior female members of one’s own sect.

Shidi: Younger martial brother. For junior male members of one’s own sect.

Shimei: Younger martial sister. For junior female members of one’s own sect.

Shiniang: Wife of shizun/shifu.

Zhangmen/Zhuangzhu/ Zunzhu: “Sect leader/Manor

leader/Esteemed leader." Used to refer to the leader of the sect. Can be used on its own or appended to a family name, e.g., Xue-zunzhu.

Other

Gong/gonggong: A title or suffix. Can be used to refer to an elderly man, a man of high status, a grandfather, a father-in-law, or in a palace context, a eunuch.

Gongzi: Young master of an affluent household, or a polite way to address young men.

Taizi: "Crown prince." A respectful title of address for the next in line to the throne.

Yifu: Person formally acknowledged as one's father; sometimes a "godfather."

Pronunciation Guide

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ǎ, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some (as in "de" in the title below) are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names and sounds from the world of Husky.

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NAMES

Èrhā hé tā de bái māo shī zūn

Èr as in **uh**

Hā as in **ha**rdy

Hé as in **hurt**

Tā as in **ta**rdy

De as in **di**rt

Bái as in **bye**

Māo as in **mou**th

Shī as in **shh**

Z as in **z**oom, ūn as in harp**oon**

Mò Rán

Mò as in **mo**ron

Rán as in **run**ning

Chǔ **W**ǎ**nníng**

Chǔ as in **choo**se

Wǎn as in **wan**ting

Níng as in run**ning**

Xuē Méng

X as in the **s** in **s**ilk, uē as in **weh**

M as in the **m** in **m**other, é as in **uh**, **ng** as in so**ng**

Shī Mèi

Shī as in **shh**

Mèi as in **may**

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **ewe**

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

APPENDIX

Glossary

Glossary

While not required reading, this glossary is intended to offer further context for the many concepts and terms utilized throughout this novel as well as provide a starting point for learning more about the rich culture from which these stories were written.

GENRES

Danmei

Danmei (耽美 / "indulgence in beauty") is a Chinese fiction genre focused on romanticized tales of love and attraction between men. It is analogous to the BL (boys' love) genre in Japanese media and is better understood as a genre of plot than a genre of setting. For example, though many danmei novels feature wuxia or xianxia settings, others are better understood as tales of sci-fi, fantasy, or horror.

Wuxia

Wuxia (武侠 / "martial heroes") is one of the oldest Chinese literary genres and consists of tales of noble heroes fighting evil and injustice. It often follows martial artists, monks, or rogues who live apart from the ruling government, which is often seen as useless or corrupt. These societal outcasts—both voluntary and otherwise—settle disputes among themselves, adhering to their own moral codes over the law.

Characters in wuxia focus primarily on human concerns, such as political strife between factions and advancing their own personal sense of justice. True wuxia is low on magical or supernatural elements. To Western moviegoers, a well-known example is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Xianxia

Xianxia (仙侠 / "immortal heroes") is a genre related to wuxia that places more emphasis on the supernatural. Its characters often strive to become stronger, with the end goal of extending their lifespan or achieving immortality.

Xianxia heavily features Daoist themes, while cultivation and the pursuit of immortality are both genre requirements. If these are not the story's central focus, it is not xianxia. *Husky* is considered part of both the danmei and xianxia genres.

TERMINOLOGY

Barriers: A type of magical shield. In *Husky*, a barrier separates the mortal realm and the ghost realm, and Chu Wanning is noted to be especially skilled in creating barriers.

Classical Chinese Chess (weiqi): Weiqi is the oldest known board game in human history. The board consists of a many-lined grid upon which opponents play unmarked black and white stones as game pieces to claim territory.

Colors:

White: Death, mourning, purity. Used in funerals for both deceased and the mourners.

Red: Happiness, good luck. Used for weddings.

Purple: Divinity and immortality; often associated with nobility, homosexuality (in the modern context), and demonkind (in the xianxia genre).

Courtesy Names: A courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. (*See Name Guide for more information.*)

Cultivation/cultivators: Cultivators are practitioners of spirituality and the martial arts. They seek to gain understanding of the will of the universe while also increasing personal strength and extending their lifespan.

Cut-sleeve: A term for a gay man. Comes from a tale about an emperor's love for, and relationship with, a male politician. The emperor was called to the morning assembly, but his lover was asleep on his robe. Rather than wake him, the emperor cut off his own sleeve.

Dragon: Great beasts who wield power over the weather. Chinese dragons differ from their Western counterparts as they are

often benevolent, bestowing blessings and granting luck. They are associated with the Heavens, the Emperor, and yang energy.

Dual Cultivation: A cultivation technique involving sex between participants that is meant to improve cultivation prowess. Can also be used as a simple euphemism for sex.

Eyes: Descriptions like “phoenix eyes” or “peach-blossom eyes” refer to eye shape. Phoenix eyes have an upturned sweep at their far corners, whereas peach-blossom eyes have a rounded upper lid and are often considered particularly alluring.

Face: *Mianzi* (面子), generally translated as “face,” is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person’s reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. For example, “having face” refers to having a good reputation and “losing face” refers to having one’s reputation hurt. Meanwhile, “giving face” means deferring to someone else to help improve their reputation, while “not wanting face” implies that a person is acting so poorly/shamelessly that they clearly don’t care about their reputation at all. “Thin face” refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, “thick face” refers to someone not easily embarrassed and immune to insults.

Fae: Fae (妖 / yao), refers to natural creatures such as animals, plants, or even inanimate objects, who over time absorb spiritual energy and gain spiritual awareness to cultivate a human form. They are sometimes referred to as “demons” or “monsters,” though they are not inherently evil. In *Husky*, faewolves (妖狼) are a rare and expensive breed of wolf. Similarly, the feathered tribe are beings who are half-immortal (仙) and half-fae.

The Five Elements: Also known as the *wuxing* (五行 / “Five Phases”) in Chinese philosophy: fire, water, wood, metal, earth. Each element corresponds to a planet: Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn, respectively. In *Husky*, cultivators’ spiritual cores correspond with one or two elements; for example, Chu Wanning’s elements are metal and wood.

Fire (火 / huo)

Water (水 / shui)

Wood (木 / mu)

Metal (金 / jin)

Earth (土 / tu)

Haitang: The *haitang* tree (海棠花), also known as crabapple or Chinese flowering apple, is endemic to China. The recurring motif for Chu Wanning is specifically the *xifu haitang* variety. In flower language, haitang symbolizes unrequited love.

Inedia: A common ability that allows an immortal to survive without mortal food or sleep by sustaining themselves on purer forms of energy based on Daoist fasting. Depending on the setting, immortals who have achieved inedia may be unable to tolerate mortal food, or they may be able to choose to eat when desired. The cultivation taught by Sisheng Peak notably does not rely on this practice.

Jade: Jade is a culturally and spiritually important mineral in China. Its durability, beauty, and the ease with which it can be utilized for crafting decorative and functional pieces alike has made it widely beloved since ancient times. The word might evoke green jade (the mineral jadeite), but Chinese texts are often referring to white jade (the mineral nephrite), as when a person's skin is described as "the color of jade."

Jianghu: A staple of wuxia, the jianghu (江湖 / "rivers and lakes") describes an underground society of martial artists, monks, rogues, artisans, and merchants who settle disputes between themselves per their own moral codes.

Lotus: This flower symbolizes purity of the heart and mind, as lotuses rise untainted from the muddy waters they grow in. It also signifies the holy seat of the Buddha.

Measurements: The “miles” and “inches” in *Husky* refer not to imperial measurement units, but to the Chinese measurement units, which have varied over time. In modern times, one Chinese mile (里 / *li*) is approximately a half-kilometer, one Chinese foot (尺 / *cun*) is approximately one-third of a meter, and one Chinese inch (寸 / *chi*) is one tenth of a Chinese foot.

Meridians: The means by which qi travels through the body, like a magical bloodstream. Medical and combat techniques that focus on redirecting, manipulating, or halting qi circulation focus on targeting the meridians at specific points on the body, known as acupoints. Techniques that can manipulate or block qi prevent a cultivator from using magical techniques until the qi block is lifted.

Moe: A Japanese term referring to cuteness or vulnerability in a character that evokes a protective feeling from the reader. Originally applied largely to female characters, the term has since seen expanded use.

Mythical Figures: Several entities from Chinese mythology make an appearance in the world of *Husky*, including:

Fuxi: Emperor of the heavens, sometimes directly called Heavenly Emperor Fuxi. A figure associated with Chinese creation mythology.

Vermilion Bird: The Vermilion Bird (朱雀上神) is one of four mythical beasts in Chinese constellations, representing the cardinal direction South, the element of fire, and the season of summer.

Yanluo: King of hell or the supreme judge of the underworld. His role in the underworld is to pass judgment on the dead, sending souls on to their next life depending on the karma they accrued from their last one.

Phoenix: Fenghuang (凤凰 / “phoenix”), a legendary bird said to only appear in times of peace and to flee when a ruler is corrupt. They are heavily associated with femininity, the empress, and happy marriages.

Pills and Elixirs: Magic medicines that can heal wounds,

improve cultivation, extend life, etc. In Chinese culture, these medicines are usually delivered in pill form, and the pills are created in special kilns.

Pleasure House: Courtesans at these establishments provided entertainment of many types, ranging from song and dance to more intimate pleasures.

Qi: *Qi* (气) is the energy in all living things. There is both righteous qi and evil or poisonous qi.

Cultivators strive to cultivate qi by absorbing it from the natural world and refining it within themselves to improve their cultivation base. A cultivation base refers to the amount of qi a cultivator possesses or is able to possess. In xianxia, natural locations such as caves, mountains, or other secluded places with beautiful scenery are often rich in qi, and practicing there can allow a cultivator to make rapid progress in their cultivation.

Cultivators and other qi manipulators can utilize their life force in a variety of ways, including imbuing objects with it to transform them into lethal weapons, or sending out blasts of energy to do damage. Cultivators also refine their senses beyond normal human levels. For instance, they may cast out their spiritual sense to gain total awareness of everything in a region around them or to sense potential danger.

Qi Circulation: The metabolic cycle of qi in the body, where it flows from the dantian to the meridians and back. This cycle purifies and refines qi, and good circulation is essential to cultivation. In xianxia, qi can be transferred from one person to another through physical contact, and it can heal someone who is wounded if the donor is trained in the art.

Qi Deviation: A qi deviation (走火入魔 / "to catch fire and enter demonhood") occurs when one's cultivation base becomes unstable. Common causes include an unstable emotional state and/or strong negative emotions, practicing cultivation methods incorrectly, reckless use of forbidden or high-level arts, or succumbing to the influence of demons and evil spirits. When qi

deviation arises from mental or emotional causes, the person is often said to have succumbed to their inner demons or "heart demons" (心魔).

Symptoms of qi deviation in fiction include panic, paranoia, sensory hallucinations, and death, whether by the qi deviation itself causing irreparable damage to the body or as a result of its symptoms—such as leaping to one's death to escape a hallucination. Common fictional treatments for qi deviation include relaxation (voluntary or forced by an external party), massage, meditation, or qi transfer from another individual.

Qiankun Pouch: (乾坤囊/ "universe pouch") A pouch containing an extradimensional space within it, capable of holding more than the physical exterior dimensions of the pouch would suggest.

Qinggong: Qinggong (轻功) is a cultivator's ability to move swiftly through the air as if on the wind.

Red Thread of Fate: The red thread imagery originates in legend and has become a Chinese symbol for fated love. An invisible red thread is said to be tied around the limb or finger of the two individuals destined to fall in love, forever linking them.

Reigning Years: Chinese emperors took to naming the eras of their reign for the purpose of tracking historical records. The names often reflected political agendas or the current reality of the socioeconomic landscape.

Shidi, Shixiong, Shizun, etc: Chinese titles and terms used to indicate a person's role or rank in relation to the speaker. Because of the robust nature of this naming system, and a lack of nuance in translating many to English, the original titles have been maintained. *(See Name Guide for more information)*

Soul-Calling Lantern: In the world of *Husky*, soul-calling lanterns (引魂灯) are lanterns embroidered with complex spell

patterns, which can only be lit and maintained using spiritual energy. A lit lantern can illuminate the human soul of a person willing to return and will hold the human soul within to be brought back and reunited with the other immortal souls and corporeal spirits. If the wielder of the lantern were to give up or have second thoughts, the human soul would be devoured.

Spiritual core: A spiritual core (灵丹/灵核) is the foundation of a cultivator's power. It is typically formed only after ten years of hard work and study.

Spiritual Root: In *Husky,* spiritual roots (灵根) are associated with a cultivator's innate talent and elemental affinities. Not every cultivator possesses spiritual roots.

Three Immortal Souls and Seven Corporeal Spirits: Hun (魂) and po (魄) are two types of souls in Chinese philosophy and religion. Hun are immortal souls which represent the spirit and intellect, and leave the body after death. Po are corporeal spirits or mortal forms which remain with the body of the deceased. Each soul governs different aspects of a person's being, ranging from consciousness and memory, to physical function and sensation. Different traditions claim there are different numbers of each, but three hun and seven po (三魂七魄) are common in Daoism.

The Three Realms: Traditionally, the universe is divided into three realms: the **heavenly realm**, the **mortal realm**, and the **ghost realm**. The heavenly realm refers to the heavens and realm of the gods, where gods reside and rule; the mortal realm refers to the human world; and the ghost realm refers to the realm of the dead.

Vinegar: To say someone is drinking vinegar or tasting vinegar means that they're having jealous or bitter feelings. Generally used for a love interest growing jealous while watching the main character receive the attention of a rival suitor.

Wheel of Reincarnation: In Buddhism, reincarnation is part of the soul's continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, known as Samsara: one's karma accumulated through the course of their life determines their circumstances in the next life. The Wheel of Reincarnation (六道轮回), translated literally as "Six Realms of Reincarnation," which souls enter after death, is often represented as having six sections, or realms. Each one represents a different "realm," or state of being, a person may attain depending on their karma: the realm of gods, Asura, humans, animals, ghosts, and demons.

White Moonlight: A romantic trope referring to a distant romantic paragon who is cherished in memory long after that person is gone. Like the moon in the sky, the memory is always present, perfect and unchanging, but like the pale light by one's bedside, it is an incorporeal shine that can only be admired, not touched. The object of admiration is out of reach, and the admiration is functionally one-way.

Willow Tree: Willow trees in Chinese culture have a plethora of meanings, including friendship, longing, femininity, and more. The Chinese word for willow (柳) is a homonym for the word "stay," which has led to it being featured in many poems and stories as a symbol of farewell and a reluctance to part.

Yin Energy and Yang Energy: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy which describes the complementary interdependence of opposite/contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and differences. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy may do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish themselves of whichever energy they lack.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rou Bao Bu Chi Rou ("Meatbun Doesn't Eat Meat") was a disciple of Sisheng Peak under the Tanlang Elder and the official chronicler of daily life at Wushan Palace. Unable to deal [redacted] after Taxian-jun's suicide, Meatbun took Madam Wang's orange cat, Cai Bao ("Veggiebun"), and fled. Thereafter Meatbun traveled the world to see the sights, making ends meet by writing down all manner of secrets and little-known anecdotes of the cultivation world—which Meatbun had gathered during travel—and selling them on the street side.

NOTABLE WORKS:

"God-Knows-What Rankings"

Top of the Cultivation World Best-Sellers List for ten years straight.

"The Red Lotus Pavilion Decameron"

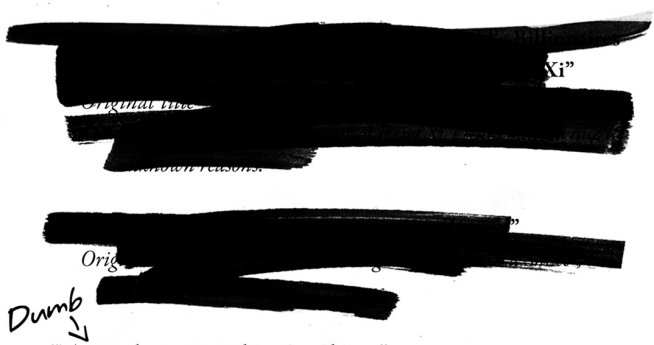
Banned by Sisheng Peak Sect Leader Xue and Yuheng Elder Chu Wanning; no longer available for sale.

[redacted]

No longer available for sale due to complaints filed by Yuheng Elder Chu Wanning.

[redacted]

2019 winner of the Ghost Realm's Annual Fuxi-Roasting Writing Contest



"The Husky & His White Cat Shizun"

Also being sold in another world.

...and others to come. Please look forward to them.

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Footnotes

1. An ethnic group located in northwestern Sichuan, on the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau. 2. Nangong Si's given name, Si (驷), is made up of the characters 马匹, which mean horse. 3. The first chapter of the Zhuangzi, one of the definitive texts of Daoism. It contains anecdotes that exemplify the carefree nature of the ideal Daoist sage. 4. One of the Five Classics of Chinese Confucian literature, which underscores moral principles. 5. Roles in many genres of Chinese opera: sheng (生), a refined or ordinary male role; dan (旦), the overall category for female roles; jing (净), a forceful, exaggerated male role often played with particularly heavy, symbolic face paint designs; and chou (丑), a male clown role. 6. Excerpt from the poem "Crossing the Han River" by Tang Dynasty poet Song Zhiwen, aka Li Pin, about being away from home without news, and the anxiety one experiences upon returning: From beyond the mountains came neither news nor letters; thus has winter gone and spring come. As I approach home my nervousness grows, I dare not ask even those passing by. 7. "Ocean of desires" is a Buddhist term, referring to worldly desires. Buddhist teaching goes that desires lead one astray from their core self and cause them to sink into the ocean of life and death. 8. Photinia serratifolia (石楠花, shinan flower), known to smell like human semen. 9. Lunar crystal (望舒晶石, lit. Wangshu crystal), named after a Chinese mythological figure who charioteers the moon, and whose name has become synonymous with it. 10. 八字, Bazi, are the eight characters assigned to a person based on their birth year, month, day, and hour, used by fortune tellers to divine the person's future prospects and marriage compatibility, among other things. 11. The names of these camellia breeds are a reference to Jin Yong's novel Demi-Gods and Semi-Devils. Specifically, these breeds, among others, are listed in an exchange between Duan Yu and Madam Wang in chapter 12, "Henceforth Obsessed." 12. From The Analects of Confucius, "One bowl of rice, one scoop of water, in a humble alley; others would not have been able to endure such a hard life, but Hui is happy all the same. Praise be to Hui!" which extols the virtues of being content with a simple life. 13. 小叶子, Xiao Ye-zi. Ye Wangxi's Ye means leaf, and this pet name literally means "little leaf."

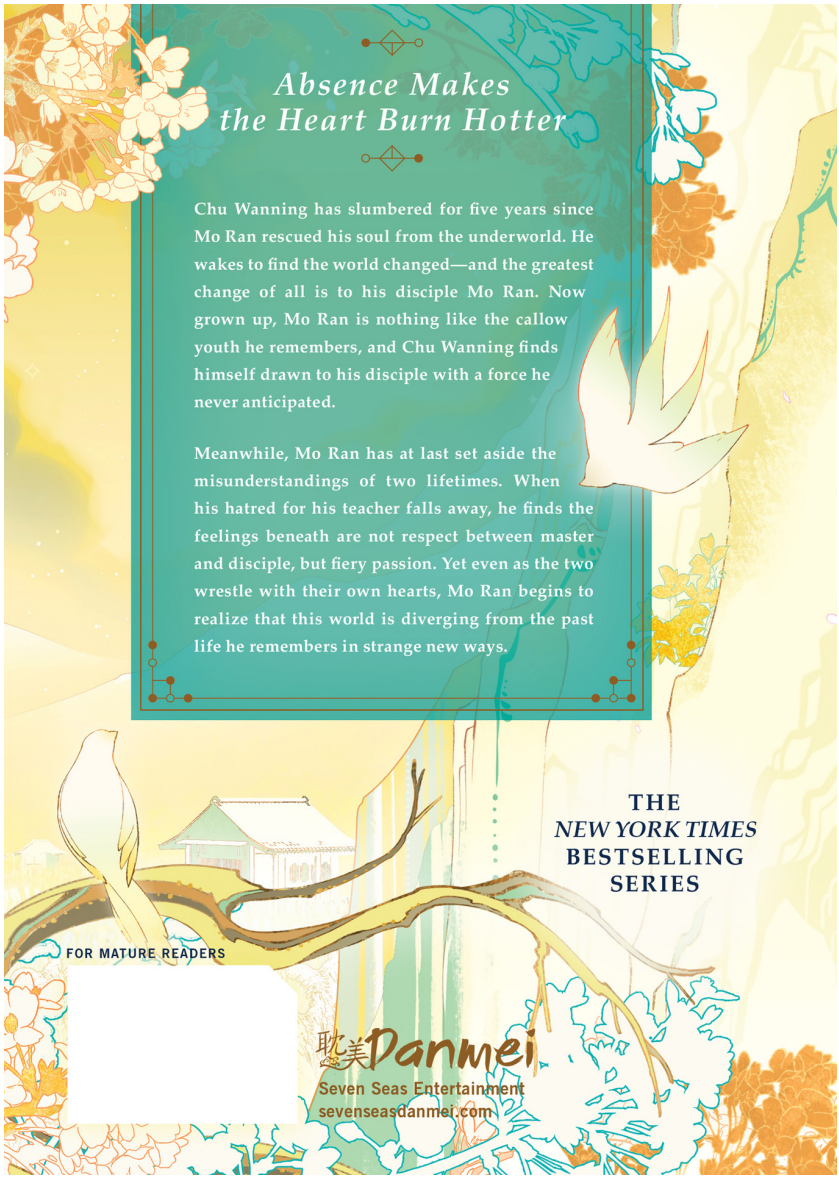
Absence Makes the Heart Burn Hotter
Chu Wanning has slumbered for five years since Mo Ran rescued his soul from the underworld. He wakes to find the world changed—and the greatest change of all is to his disciple Mo Ran. Now grown up, Mo Ran is nothing like the callow youth he remembers, and Chu Wanning finds himself drawn to his disciple with a force he never anticipated.
Meanwhile, Mo Ran has at last set aside the misunderstandings of two lifetimes. When his hatred for his teacher falls away, he finds the feelings beneath are not respect between master and disciple, but fiery passion. Yet even as the two wrestle with their own hearts, Mo Ran begins to realize that this world is diverging from the past life he remembers in strange new ways.
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Table of contents

1. Table of Contents
2. Color Gallery
3. Title Page
4. Copyrights and Credits
5. Table of Contents Page
6. Chapter 120: Shizun Goes into Seclusion
7. Chapter 121: Shizun Is the Real Zongshi
8. Chapter 122: Shizun's Reflection
9. Chapter 123: Shizun Visits My Dreams, for He Knows I Think of Him Often
10. Chapter 124: Shizun Awakens
11. Chapter 125: Shizun Doesn't Need to Find a Cultivation Partner
12. Chapter 126: Shizun, Wait One More Chapter for Me!
13. Chapter 127: Shizun, Careful, the Ground's Slippery
14. Chapter 128: Shizun, You Can't Just Wear Whatever Clothes You Feel Like
15. Chapter 129: Shizun, Do You Like What You See?
16. Chapter 130: Shizun, I've Crossed Five Years to Come See You
17. Chapter 131: Shizun Does Some Light Reading
18. Chapter 132: Shizun and Shi Mei
19. Chapter 133: Shizun Has the Purest Mind
20. Chapter 134: Shizun Sure Can Eat
21. Chapter 135: Shizun Studies on the Sly
22. Chapter 136: Shizun, Relax
23. Chapter 137: Shizun and I Get Settled In
24. Chapter 138: Shizun Just Might Blue-Ball Me to Death
25. Chapter 139: Shizun, Sweet Dreams
26. Chapter 140: Shizun, Turn Over
27. Chapter 141: Shizun, Don't Strip!
28. Chapter 142: Shizun, This Is Cruel and Unusual
29. Chapter 143: Shizun Is My Unattainable First Love, My Erstwhile Once-Lover, the Object of My Most Sincere Affection, the Source of My Most Torturous Affliction, and Has Been All Along

30. Chapter 144: Shizun, I Like You
31. Chapter 145: Shizun Has a Mealtime Companion Now
32. Chapter 146: Shizun, Is She Really Getting Married?
33. Chapter 147: Shizun, Let's Use Our Words, Not Our Fists
34. Chapter 148: Shizun Is a Natural Tease
35. Chapter 149: Shizun, I Can't Get Up
36. Chapter 150: Shizun and I Swapped Rooms
37. Chapter 151: Shizun, I Only Want You
38. Chapter 152: Shizun, Look! It's Mei Hanxue!
39. Chapter 153: Shizun's Most Hated Sect Leader
40. Chapter 154: Shizun, I'm Off to Look for Ye Wangxi
41. The Story Continues
42. Appendix: Characters
43. Appendix: Sects and Locations
44. Appendix: Name Guide
45. Appendix: Pronunciation Guide
46. Glossary: Genres
47. Glossary: Terminology
48. About the Author
49. Footnotes
50. Back Cover
51. Newsletter

Landmarks

1. Cover
2. Beginning
3. Table of Contents

1. 1
2. 2
3. 3
4. 4
5. 5
6. 6
7. 7

8. 8
9. 9
10. 10
11. 11
12. 12
13. 13
14. 14
15. 15
16. 16
17. 17
18. 18
19. 19
20. 20
21. 21
22. 22
23. 23
24. 24
25. 25
26. 26
27. 27
28. 28
29. 29
30. 30
31. 31
32. 32
33. 33
34. 34
35. 35
36. 36
37. 37
38. 38
39. 39
40. 40
41. 41
42. 42
43. 43
44. 44
45. 45
46. 46
47. 47

48. 48
49. 49
50. 50
51. 51
52. 52
53. 53
54. 54
55. 55
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69. 69
70. 70
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73. 73
74. 74
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76. 76
77. 77
78. 78
79. 79
80. 80
81. 81
82. 82
83. 83
84. 84
85. 85
86. 86
87. 87

88. 88
89. 89
90. 90
91. 91
92. 92
93. 93
94. 94
95. 95
96. 96
97. 97
98. 98
99. 99
100. 100
101. 101
102. 102
103. 103
104. 104
105. 105
106. 106
107. 107
108. 108
109. 109
110. 110
111. 111
112. 112
113. 113
114. 114
115. 115
116. 116
117. 117
118. 118
119. 119
120. 120
121. 121
122. 122
123. 123
124. 124
125. 125
126. 126
127. 127

128. 128
129. 129
130. 130
131. 131
132. 132
133. 133
134. 134
135. 135
136. 136
137. 137
138. 138
139. 139
140. 140
141. 141
142. 142
143. 143
144. 144
145. 145
146. 146
147. 147
148. 148
149. 149
150. 150
151. 151
152. 152
153. 153
154. 154
155. 155
156. 156
157. 157
158. 158
159. 159
160. 160
161. 161
162. 162
163. 163
164. 164
165. 165
166. 166
167. 167

168. 168
169. 169
170. 170
171. 171
172. 172
173. 173
174. 174
175. 175
176. 176
177. 177
178. 178
179. 179
180. 180
181. 181
182. 182
183. 183
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185. 185
186. 186
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194. 194
195. 195
196. 196
197. 197
198. 198
199. 199
200. 200
201. 201
202. 202
203. 203
204. 204
205. 205
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207. 207

208. 208
209. 209
210. 210
211. 211
212. 212
213. 213
214. 214
215. 215
216. 216
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218. 218
219. 219
220. 220
221. 221
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223. 223
224. 224
225. 225
226. 226
227. 227
228. 228
229. 229
230. 230
231. 231
232. 232
233. 233
234. 234
235. 235
236. 236
237. 237
238. 238
239. 239
240. 240
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243. 243
244. 244
245. 245
246. 246
247. 247

248. 248
249. 249
250. 250
251. 251
252. 252
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255. 255
256. 256
257. 257
258. 258
259. 259
260. 260
261. 261
262. 262
263. 263
264. 264
265. 265
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267. 267
268. 268
269. 269
270. 270
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272. 272
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274. 274
275. 275
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282. 282
283. 283
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287. 287

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298. 298
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300. 300
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302. 302
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306. 306
307. 307
308. 308
309. 309
310. 310
311. 311
312. 312
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316. 316
317. 317
318. 318
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321. 321
322. 322
323. 323
324. 324
325. 325
326. 326
327. 327

328. 328
329. 329
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331. 331
332. 332
333. 333
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336. 336
337. 337
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341. 341
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343. 343
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351. 351
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356. 356
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366. 366
367. 367

368. 368
369. 369
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371. 371
372. 372
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375. 375
376. 376
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382. 382
383. 383
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430. 430
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439. 439
440. 440
441. 441
442. 442